

Obligations to the Future

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Abstract

Freedom is considered one of America's most cherished values. Most Americans agree that freedom requires order, justice, security, opportunity, fairness, absence of harm, absence of undue interference, and a variety of rights. But while Americans may agree on these things in broad, abstract terms, they are often divided over their precise definitions. In this article, the authors emphasize how a variety of societal problems—including climate change, racial inequality, poverty and economic inequality, concentrated disadvantage, intergenerational transmission of privilege and disadvantage, and the undermining of truth and expertise—are issues of freedom. The authors discuss the connection between these issues and freedom, and the need to demand action from elected representatives in order to enact true freedom for all Americans.

Keywords

climate change, concentrated disadvantage, economic inequality, freedom, opportunity, post-truth, poverty, racial inequality, social welfare

Introduction

Freedom is a central part of the American identity, 'one of America's most cherished values' (Patterson and Fosse 2019, p. 26). When it comes to what freedom entails, most Americans would agree that there are political, social, and economic dimensions. Most agree that in a free society there is a need for order, justice, security, opportunity, and fairness. There is a shared sense that freedom requires the absence of harm and undue interference. Most believe that freedom requires a variety of rights, including those related to speech, property, voting, religion, fair legal treatment, assembly, the press, and so on (Lakoff 2006).

But while Americans may agree on these things in broad, abstract terms, they are often divided over their precise meanings. What does true opportunity entail? What types of security are needed in order to be free? And so on. Americans also disagree about which freedoms the government should guarantee and which ones should be left to markets and individuals.

So while many Americans may prize freedom in general terms, it is not always clear that they are talking about the same thing.

Most Americans, for instance, agree that there should be equality of educational opportunity. But a problem arises when one attempts to establish a shared sense of what equality of educational

opportunity actually means in practice. Does it simply mean access to a public school? If that is the case, we have achieved such equality in the U.S. For many, however, this is inadequate if the schools that different children attend are not of the same quality. Many would go even further and argue that when some children face unequal challenges outside of the schoolhouse (such as a lack of important economic/cultural/social resources or living in a dangerous neighborhood), they cannot be said to have an equal opportunity to succeed in school. Indeed, we have made such arguments elsewhere:

‘as society is always inside of us, we are always inside of society. By virtue of our existence, we constantly impact and are impacted by the people and contexts around us. What goes on beneath the skin is important, as are the forces outside of ourselves that constantly impact our life’s path. From the families we belong to, to the neighborhoods we live in and schools we attend, to the peer networks we are a part of, and beyond, our opportunities and direction in life are constantly impacted by people, environments, institutions, and forces outside of our control. . . . In order to be truly free, individuals need agency, or the ability to freely decide on the life that they want to lead, and be able to think and act autonomously in pursuit of that life. We define true agency as the combination of (a) the full development of one’s abilities and (b) having access (unrestricted by unjust barriers) to resources and opportunity pathways. American individualism is inadequate in explaining the significant impact of social forces on the abilities, resources, and opportunities of individuals. . . . Opportunity pathways cannot be fully utilized with few resources and compromised abilities, and abilities and resources are of little use without opportunities. . . . How will individuals become the best version of themselves if their home, neighborhood, and school environments stunt the development of their abilities? Or if they are lucky enough to have those abilities developed, how far will they go in life if good schools and well-paying jobs are not accessible to them? Because individuals and societies are not separate and distinct entities, but inextricably intertwined, one cannot understand the life of an individual without understanding how their society has profoundly shaped their abilities, resources, and opportunity pathways. If we are not in full control of our abilities, resources, or opportunities, we are not in full control of our destiny’ (Eppard et. al. 2020, pp. 18-19).¹

¹ Later in this passage we added, ‘An extensive literature demonstrates the importance of environmental factors and forces beyond individual control in shaping an individual’s behavior, well-being, and circumstances. Our individual characteristics—such as our individual identities, beliefs, inclinations, abilities, resources, behaviors, and so on—as well as our opportunities, are all shaped from birth (and in fact earlier in the womb) by a variety of forces beyond our control. A number of interlocking environments not of our choosing, from our family, neighborhood, peer network, school, and community to the country and historical period into which we are born, shape who we become as individuals and the opportunities available to us. The social groups we belong to and how those groups are either privileged or disadvantaged by the larger society shape who we become and how we will fit into society. Large-scale economic and political forces impact us at the individual level, profoundly shaping our development and path through the world. Social environments, relations, institutions, and forces significantly impact how our lives develop across time. Every major outcome in life—from educational attainment, to employment status, to earnings and wealth, to health and life expectancy, to risk of criminal involvement or victimization, just to name a few—is deeply impacted by forces beyond the individual’ (Eppard et. al. 2020, p. 19).

From this perspective, equality of educational opportunity then becomes about much more than access to a seat in a school classroom. As Amartya Sen asserts, ‘Without the substantive freedom and capability to do something, a person cannot be responsible for doing it’ (1999, p. 284). Equality includes not just having access to a school, but one that is well-supported and provides a quality learning environment. It means growing up in a safe and loving household. It includes not being stuck in a neighborhood besieged by crime, drug abuse, hopelessness, or pollution.

Household, neighborhood, and community factors—not to mention state- and national-level forces—are inextricably associated with unequal educational outcomes. Equality of educational opportunity thus includes access to a quality school *and* a variety of other necessary conditions.

We use educational opportunity as but one example of the disagreements and various perspectives involved in debates about freedom.

Why should we think so deeply about what freedom truly entails? Because it is an important value for so many Americans, and to understand both the limits of our current freedom and potential for future expansions of freedom, we need to understand the complicated ways in which social arrangements and policy decisions constrain our freedom. In coming to a better understanding of these constraints, we can make better demands of our elected representatives, pressing them to work tirelessly to help provide the conditions that enact freedom for the largest number of people.

We need to think deeply about the nuances of true freedom beyond just freedom from government (a notion of freedom which far too many Americans fall back on) to include freedom to live the lives we desire for ourselves. Not just ‘freedom *from*,’ but ‘freedom *to*’ as well.

As George Lakoff notes, we need to ‘know our own minds’ and develop a deep understanding of how we define core concepts and values, because such definitions are the unconscious basis for many of our moral and political choices:

‘your deep frames and metaphors define the range within which your ‘free will’ operates. You can’t will something that is outside your capacity to imagine. Free will can operate only on ideas in your brain; it cannot operate on ideas you do not have. Free will is thus not totally free. It is radically constrained by the frames and metaphors shaping your brain and limiting how you see the world’ (2006, pp. 15-16).

Lakoff goes on to explain that our deeply-held frames and metaphors establish our norms of behavior, help us to understand right and wrong, help us to interpret both the past and the present, and shape what we think is possible and desirable for the future. These conceptual frames contain certain structures and assumptions, while excluding others. They tap into some of our deepest emotions. Once internalized, conceptual frames can impact your thoughts and behavior in an unconscious and automatic manner (he argues that most thought is unconscious), without requiring you to examine where those ideas came from and their moral and political implications. According to Lakoff, when it comes to how we define freedom, ‘Ownership of the word means ownership of the idea that goes with the word, and with it, domination of the culture defined by the idea’ (2006, p. 17).

In this article, we argue that a number of issues facing American society today—including social inequalities (economic, racial, gender, and others), climate change, the undermining of expertise and truth, attacks on the free press, and the shortcomings of social policies—are issues of freedom. While many Americans may agree, far too many fail to make a strong connection between these issues and liberty. We believe highlighting some of these important issues (among *many* others which could warrant discussion)² and their relationships to freedom is important as we all collectively chart the future of our imperiled nation.

If we do not address these problems in an effective manner, we ensure less freedom not only for millions of Americans today, but for many more *in future generations to come*.

Social Inequalities and Freedom

Social inequalities—whether based on social class, race/ethnicity, gender, or other social categories—clearly restrict the freedom of millions of Americans. These inequalities stunt people’s development and limit their access to crucial resources and opportunity pathways. As a result, their life chances are negatively impacted (while others benefit from such inequalities) in countless areas, including their happiness, health and longevity, educational attainment, and economic security. While we will focus on economic and racial inequalities, a whole array of inequalities are quite daunting and unjust, and would certainly warrant discussion.

The top 10 percent of Americans owns almost three-quarters (73%) of all wealth and receives nearly half (47%) of all income (WID 2020). The top one percent of Americans earns 40 percent more in one week than the bottom fifth earns over the entire year (Stiglitz 2013, p. 5). The post-tax/transfer Gini coefficient in the U.S. (0.39) puts it near the very top end among OECD countries (OECD 2020c).

In this era of inequality, the working class has fallen farther and farther behind. Many working-class Americans live in areas that have experienced the ‘trauma of a simultaneous economic, social, and political collapse’ (Gest 2016, p. 10) over the last few decades. For working-class Americans coming of age today, the transition into adulthood (such as leaving home, attending college, becoming financially independent, and marrying and starting a family) is often delayed, postponed, and/or canceled (Silva 2013). Since the 1970s, workers with a high school degree or less have seen their real wages decrease, while wages for those with a college degree have increased (Luhby 2016; Draught 2018; Gordon 2018). Michèle Lamont notes that working-class living standards ‘are in long-term and uninterrupted decline,’ and as a result ‘the ideal of social success may appear increasingly unreachable to them’ (2000, p. 2). Beyond just wages, a number of indicators of working-class well-being are flashing red—including labor force participation, marriage and divorce rates, social mobility, health and longevity, community engagement, and political participation (Lamont 2000; Silva 2013; Cherlin 2014; Case and Deaton 2015; Chen 2016; The Economist 2017; Graham 2017; Williams 2017; Eppard et. al. 2020). As one powerful example, a recent study by Case and Deaton found increasing midlife mortality from the late 1990s to today for working-class Whites, due in part to increases in deaths caused by drugs, alcohol, or suicide, or what the authors refer to as ‘deaths of despair’ (2020). Case and Deaton found that,

² This list is certainly not exhaustive and there are many more issues we could discuss.

‘mortality rates of [middle-aged] whites with no more than a high school degree, which were around 30 percent lower than mortality rates of [all middle-aged] blacks in 1999, grew to be 30 percent higher than [all middle-aged] blacks by 2015’ (2017).

Inequality scholar Richard Wilkinson notes how high levels of economic inequality are ‘socially corrosive’ for a society:

‘I think one of the most fundamental impacts of inequality is the damage it does to social relations. You can see that in measures of involvement in community life, measures of trust, violence, and so on. Community life weakens in more unequal societies and people trust each other less. People are less willing to help each other in more unequal societies. You also see a well-established pattern of violence, usually measured by homicide rates, with much higher rates in more unequal societies. When you are walking home late at night in any big city, inequality makes the difference between either being fearful and having to be aware of who is on the streets near you, or not having to have the slightest worry about that. It makes a huge difference. It is a major infringement on freedom, particularly of women. In more unequal societies a much higher proportion of the population is involved in what is sometimes called ‘guard’ labor—security staff, police, prison staff, etc. These are basically the people we use to protect ourselves from each other. So what inequality does most fundamentally is, as you look from more equal societies to more unequal ones, there is a transition from high levels of trust, reciprocity, community life, involvement with each other, and a sense of shared well-being, to societies where people are afraid of each other, where there is more violence, fear, and mistrust. Life becomes a matter of getting as much as you can for yourself and defending it from others. It is a very clear pattern.’³

As Wilkinson notes, high levels of economic inequality can impact societies in a variety of negative ways. Research shows that economic inequality is not only associated with violence cross-nationally (see Figure 1 and Appendix Figure 1),⁴ but also academic performance, child well-being, drug abuse, educational attainment, incarceration, infant mortality, life expectancy, mental health, obesity, social mobility (see Figure 2 and Appendix Figure 2), teen pregnancy, and trust (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).⁵ Living in societies burdened with such problems is clearly a restriction on citizens’ freedom. We can all agree that the absence of fear and the ability to pursue one’s dreams regardless of one’s starting point in life, for instance, are not only desirable but important aspects of freedom. And different societies offer very different conditions in this regard.

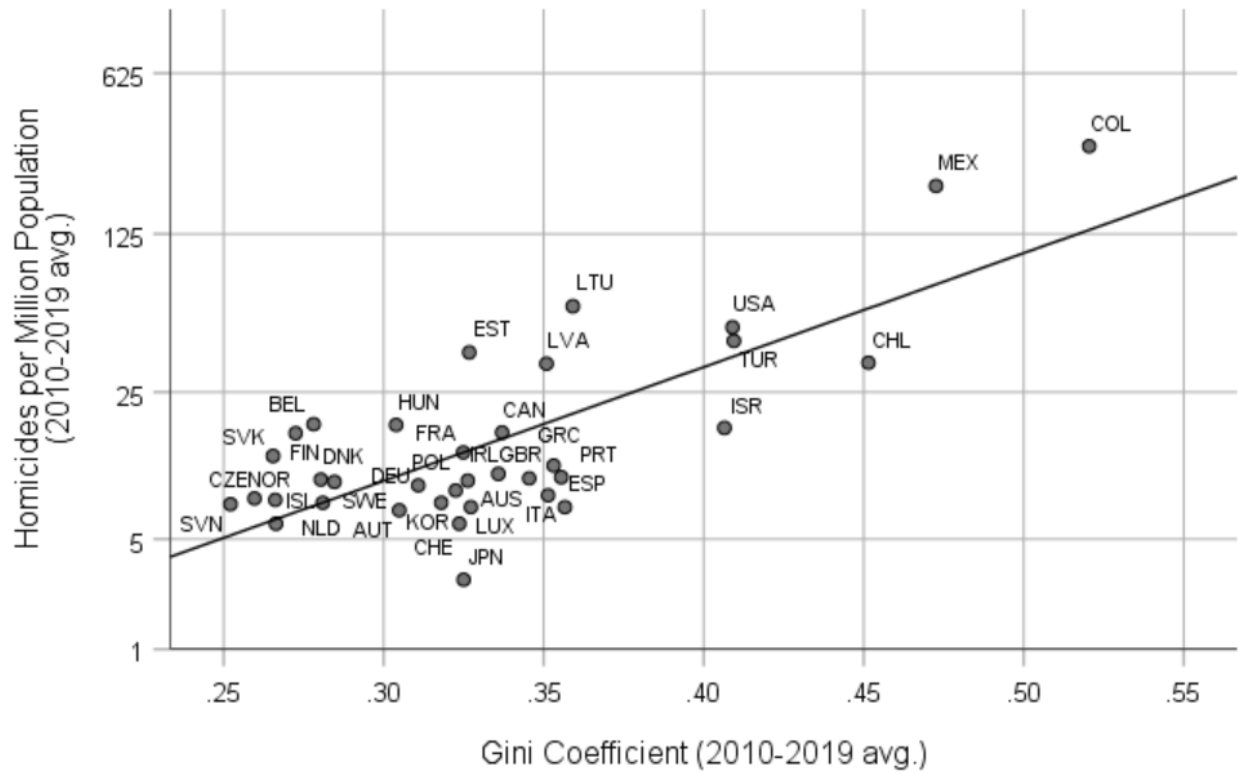
As Wilkinson astutely argues, ‘If Americans went to countries like Sweden and Norway they would feel more rather than less free’ (Eppard et. al. 2018a, p. 143).

³ Interview conducted by the authors for this article.

⁴ For more on this association, see *Killing the Competition* by Martin Daly (2017).

⁵ For some social problems, income inequality may have a direct impact. For others, it may be indirect. For still others, there may be a third factor at work.

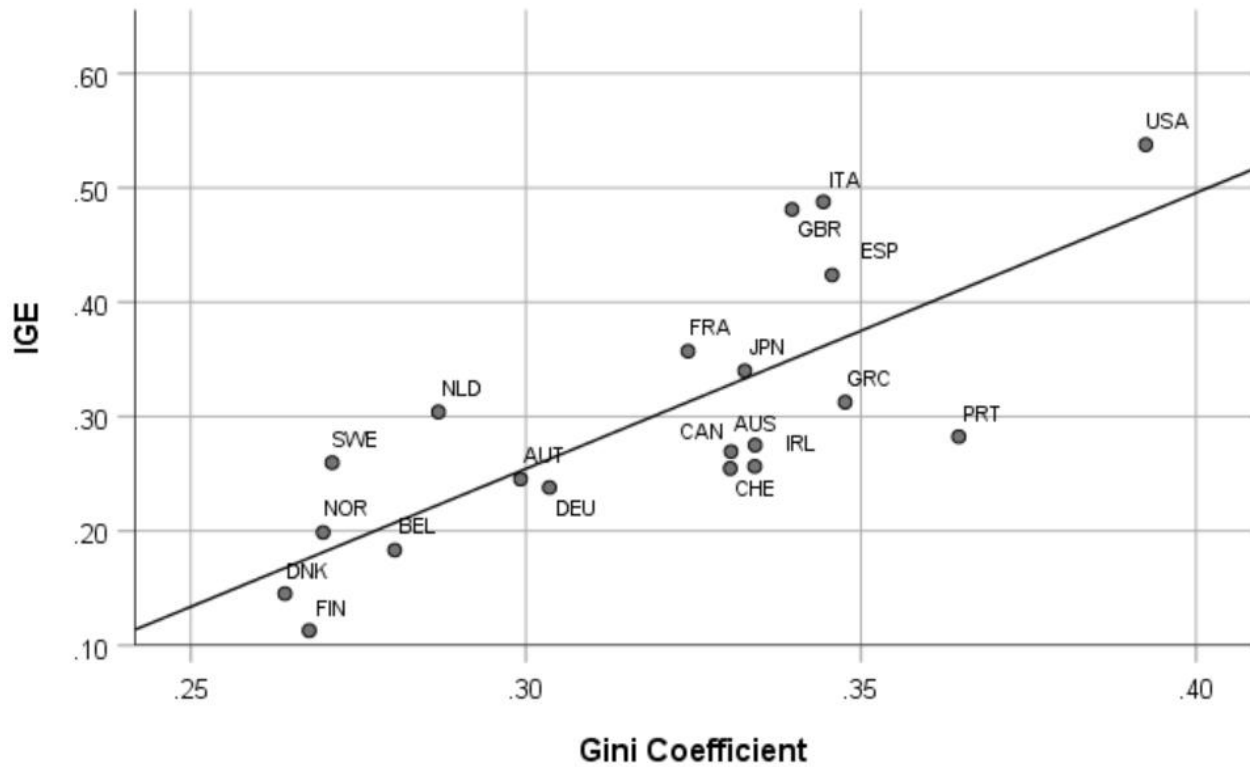
Figure 1. Association between Income Inequality and Homicides among OECD Countries.



Note: $r = 0.74$ ($p < .001$). All OECD countries with data included ($N = 36$).

Source: Authors' calculations using World Bank data (2020).

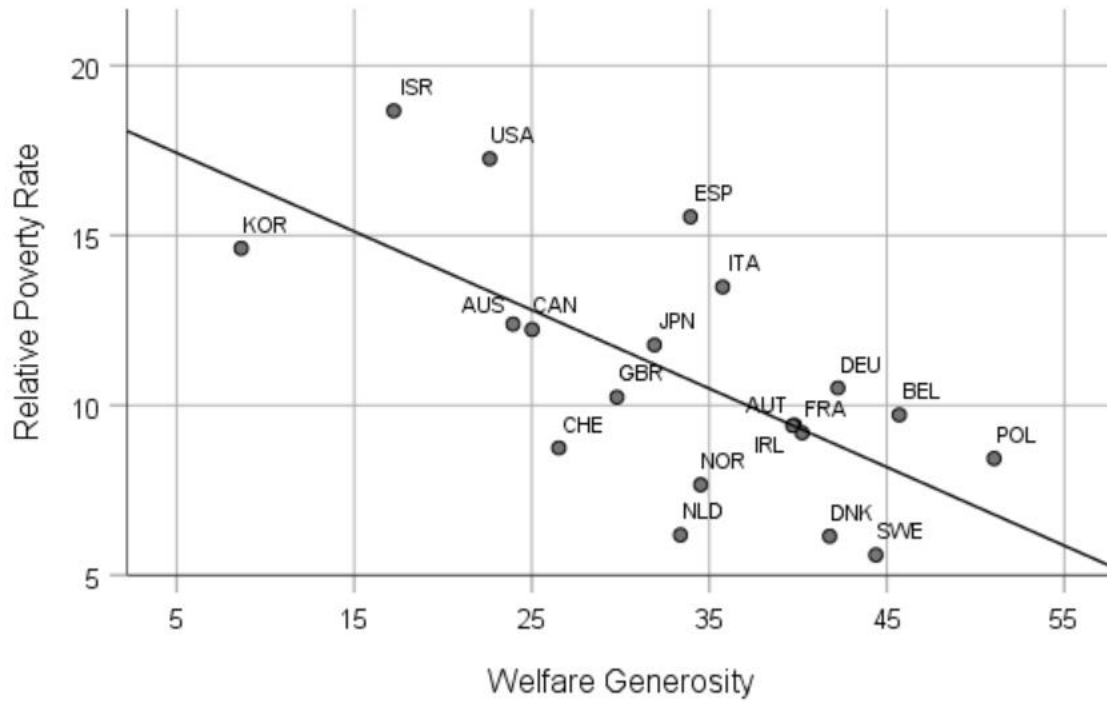
Figure 2. Association between Income Inequality and Social Mobility among 20 Wealthy Countries.



Note: $r = 0.77$ ($p < .001$). Gini coefficient is historical average for each country from 1967-2018. For IGE cohorts, see GDIM 2018.

Source: Authors' calculations using GDIM (2018) and World Bank (2020) data.

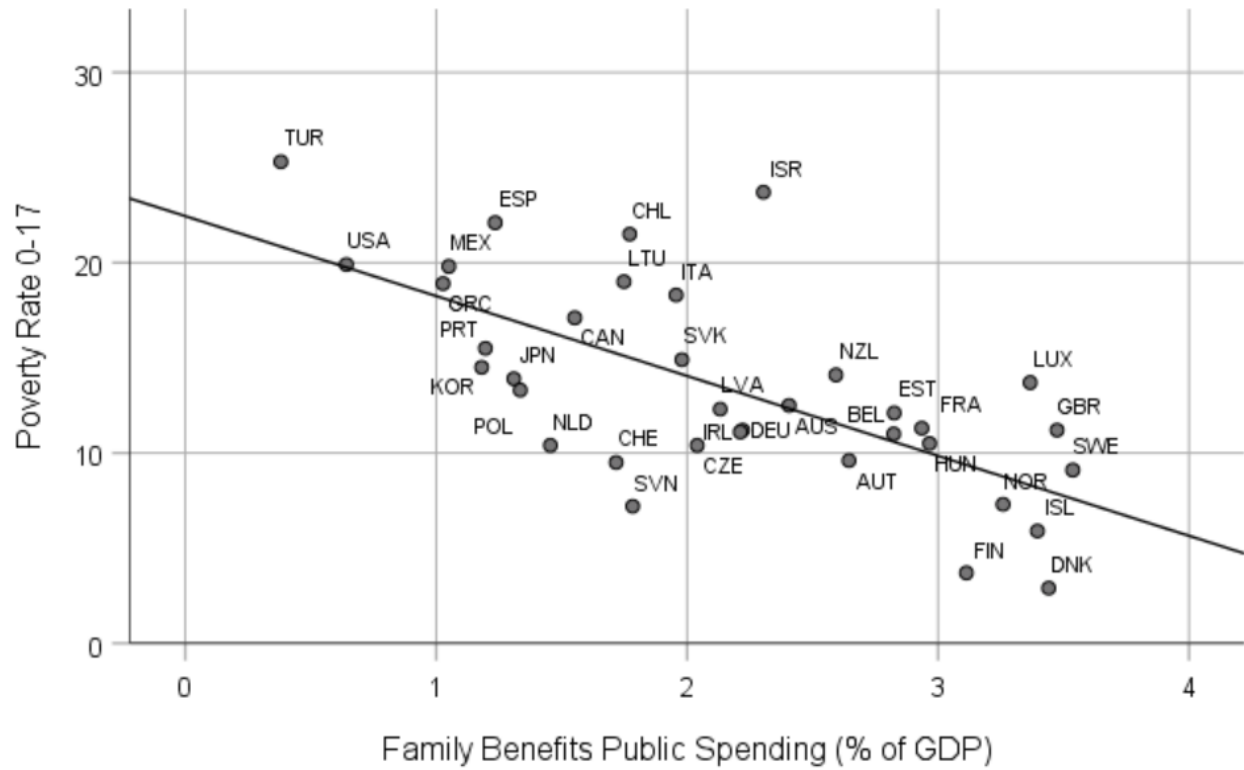
Figure 3. Association between Welfare Generosity and Relative Poverty among 20 Wealthy Countries.



Note: $r = -0.67$ ($p < .01$). See Brady and Bostic (2015) for welfare generosity measure.

Source: Authors' calculations in collaboration with David Brady using Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) data (2020).

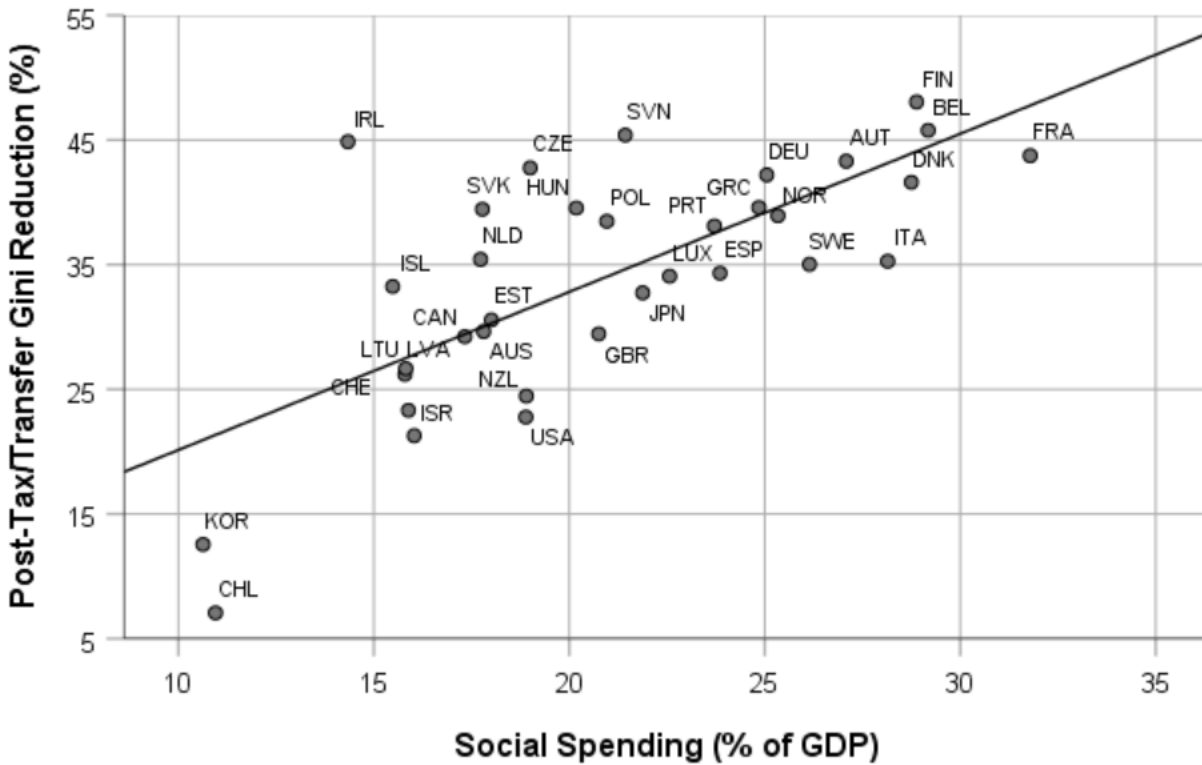
Figure 4. Association between Family Benefits Public Spending and Child Poverty among OECD Countries.



Note: $r = -0.68$ ($p < .001$).

Source: Authors' calculations using OECD data (2020c).

Figure 5. Association between Social Spending and Income Inequality Reduction Post-Tax/Transfer among OECD Countries.



Note: $r = 0.71$ ($p < .001$). All OECD countries with recent data included.
Source: Authors' calculations using OECD (2020d) data.

On measures of not only economic inequality, but also poverty, child poverty, single parent family poverty, and a variety of other social problems, the U.S. fares poorly relative to most wealthy countries (Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis 2015; Eppard et. al. 2020; OECD 2020c). This is not due to laws of nature, but the priorities of American citizens and their leaders. Research makes it clear that generous and well-designed social programs are associated with lower levels of these problems across OECD countries (see Figures 3-5).⁶ In fact, the generosity and design of social welfare programs are better predictors of poverty and inequality across wealthy countries than economic growth or demographic characteristics (Smeeding 2004; Brady 2009; Brady et. al. 2017; Eppard et. al. 2020). It is not the characteristics of the American population (levels of educational attainment, the unemployment rate, etc.) that give the U.S. high poverty and inequality,⁷ nor is it a lack of means to address these problems. Instead, the failing is in the priorities of affluent citizens and the elected representatives who cater to them, priorities which are not always aligned with the needs and desires of the majority of the population. As Timothy Smeeding argues, ‘We have more inequality and poverty than other nations because we choose to have more’ (2004, p. 24).

One of the negative consequences of living in a society which allows such high levels of inequality is highly unequal opportunities for children.⁸ One way to examine equality of opportunity is by measuring social mobility, which is commonly done by estimating a country’s intergenerational earnings elasticity (IGE).⁹ The IGE in the U.S. is high, at the top end among OECD countries (Mishel et. al. 2012). Researchers have generally found the IGE in the U.S. to be around 0.50, a strong relationship, with some recent estimates as high as 0.60 or higher (Mazumder 2015; GDIM 2018).¹⁰ In fact, a child’s likelihood of rising from the bottom of the income hierarchy to the top would almost double by simply being born north of the U.S.-Canada border instead of south of it (Reeves and Krause 2018).

Only 48 percent of American children born in the bottom income decile meet key benchmarks in early childhood compared to 78 percent of those born in the top decile. By adulthood, this gap

⁶ It should be noted that economic inequality reduction is the result of both taxation (which brings income groups closer together) and social spending (which increases household resources, particularly at the bottom of the income hierarchy).

⁷ In fact, David Brady and his colleagues (2017) show that, when it comes to the major individual risk factors associated with poverty (low educational attainment, single parenthood, unemployment, and young headship), the U.S. is *below average* compared to other wealthy countries in terms of the proportion of its citizens with such characteristics.

⁸ As Melvin Tumin argues, ‘It is only when there is genuinely equal access to recruitment and training for all potentially talented persons that differential rewards can conceivably be justified as functional. And stratification systems are apparently inherently antagonistic to the development of such full equality of opportunity’ (1953, p. 389).

⁹ As Lawrence Mishel and his colleagues explain, ‘Economists measure the extent of intergenerational mobility by calculating the correlation between income or earnings of parents and that of their children once they grow up and earn their own income—this is known as intergenerational elasticity, or IGE. . . The higher the IGE, the greater the influence of one’s birth circumstances on later life position’ (2012, p. 150). IGE values typically range from zero to one. A value of one would suggest extreme rigidity—children earning basically the same exact incomes as their parents. A value of zero would suggest virtually no relationship between the earnings of parents and children.

¹⁰ Mazumder argues that American social mobility data ‘clearly challenge the ideal of America as a highly mobile society where individuals succeed or fail irrespective of their initial circumstances of birth’ (2005, p. 81).

actually widens (40% versus 75%) (Sawhill et. al. 2012, p. 7).¹¹ Sixty-two percent of American children born in the bottom income decile will likely remain in the bottom three deciles in adulthood, with only one percent rising to the top decile. Of those born in the top decile, 59 percent will stay in the top three deciles in adulthood, with only two percent falling to the bottom (Hertz 2005). Imagine a hypothetical kindergarten cohort of 25 poor students meeting years later at their twenty-year high-school reunion—at these mobility rates, maybe one of those 25 poor classmates would have risen to the top of the income hierarchy, while 15 or 16 would have remained stuck at or near the bottom.

Economist Miles Corak has demonstrated a strong association between income inequality and IGEs across countries ($r = 0.77$) (Mishel et. al. 2012, p. 161), an association that Alan Krueger famously dubbed the ‘Great Gatsby Curve.’ In Figure 2 and Appendix Figure 2 we calculated a similar relationship using World Bank data. As illustrated by our data, as income inequality increases, parents’ income tends to have a stronger influence on their children’s adult outcomes, which clearly undermines equality of opportunity. Economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues have demonstrated a similar relationship between income inequality and upward social mobility across commuting zones within the U.S. ($r = -0.58$) (2014, Online Appendix Figure XI).

Tables 1 and 2 show how much upward mobility rates vary across U.S. states and counties. North Dakota is the highest-mobility state based on the average upward-mobility rate of its counties, and South Carolina is the lowest. As Table 2 demonstrates, when ranking ND and SC counties based on upward mobility for low-income men, there is virtually no comingling of counties—all ND counties except for one do better than even the best-performing SC county. The only ND county that did not outperform the best SC county was Sioux County, ND—a county which lies entirely within the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which (like many Native American reservations) is

¹¹ Similarly, while only 34 percent of children of the weakest parents (as measured by the Home Observation for the Measurement of the Environment - HOME scale) are meeting key benchmarks in early childhood and 36 percent in early adulthood, children of the strongest parents are doing much better in early childhood (77%) and early adulthood (75%) (Reeves and Howard 2013, p. 9). Reeves and Howard explain that, ‘Parenting quality is not randomly distributed across the population. . . Almost half of all parents in the bottom income quintile fall into the category of weakest parents—and just three percent are among the strongest parents. Similarly, 45 percent of mothers with less than a high school degree are among the weakest parents and four percent of them are among the strongest parents. Forty-four percent of single mothers fall into the ‘weakest’ parent category, with just three percent in the strongest group. At the other end of the scale, higher levels of income, education, and family stability all strongly contribute to better parenting’ (2013, p. 6) (see Reeves and Howard 2013 for the use of the HOME scale to measure parenting ability). Less than half of poor children are ready for school at age five, compared to 75 percent of non-poor children (Isaacs 2012). Seventy-two percent of middle-class children know the alphabet when starting school, compared to only 19 percent of poor children (Putnam 2015, p. 116). Greg Duncan and his colleagues explain that, ‘Income poverty has a strong association with a low level of preschool ability, which is associated with low test scores later in childhood as well as grade failure, school disengagement, and dropping out of school’ (1998, p. 420). While almost all children from the top socioeconomic quartile graduate from high school, more than a quarter of children from the bottom quartile do not (Putnam 2015, p. 184). High school students with high-earning parents average a 1714 cumulative SAT score, versus a 1326 average for those with low-earning parents (Goldfarb 2014). Only 14 percent of children from low-SES backgrounds complete college, compared to 60 percent of their high-SES peers (Bjorklund-Young 2016). Seventy-four percent of students at the most selective American colleges come from families in the top quarter of the socioeconomic scale, but just three percent come from the bottom quarter (Carnevale and Rose 2003, p. 11).

Table 1. Average County Upward Mobility Rates for Low-Income Men across U.S. States

State	Avg. County Upward Mobility	State	Avg. County Upward Mobility
North Dakota	24.64	Illinois	9.80
Wyoming	19.76	Idaho	9.44
Nebraska	16.75	Oregon	9.38
South Dakota	16.00	New Mexico	9.14
Montana	15.87	Hawaii	8.77
Nevada	14.53	West Virginia	8.60
New Jersey	14.53	Maine	8.17
Massachusetts	14.11	Missouri	7.87
Minnesota	14.03	Virginia	7.59
Iowa	13.66	Michigan	7.50
Utah	13.24	Arizona	7.47
Rhode Island	12.64	Indiana	7.38
Texas	12.58	Ohio	7.34
Colorado	12.34	Delaware	7.31
Connecticut	12.03	Arkansas	6.88
Oklahoma	11.96	Alaska	6.78
Kansas	11.87	Kentucky	6.58
California	11.26	Florida	6.45
Louisiana	10.93	Mississippi	6.33
New York	10.86	Alabama	5.75
Pennsylvania	10.75	Tennessee	5.37
Maryland	10.60	North Carolina	5.03
Wisconsin	10.40	Georgia	4.99
Washington	10.06	Washington, D.C.	4.41
New Hampshire	10.04	South Carolina	4.13
Vermont	9.89		

Note: Percentage of men raised in low-income families who rise to the top 20% in household income as adults. Washington, D.C. included with the 50 states for comparison. Average for all U.S. counties: 9.92%.

Source: Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2020) data.

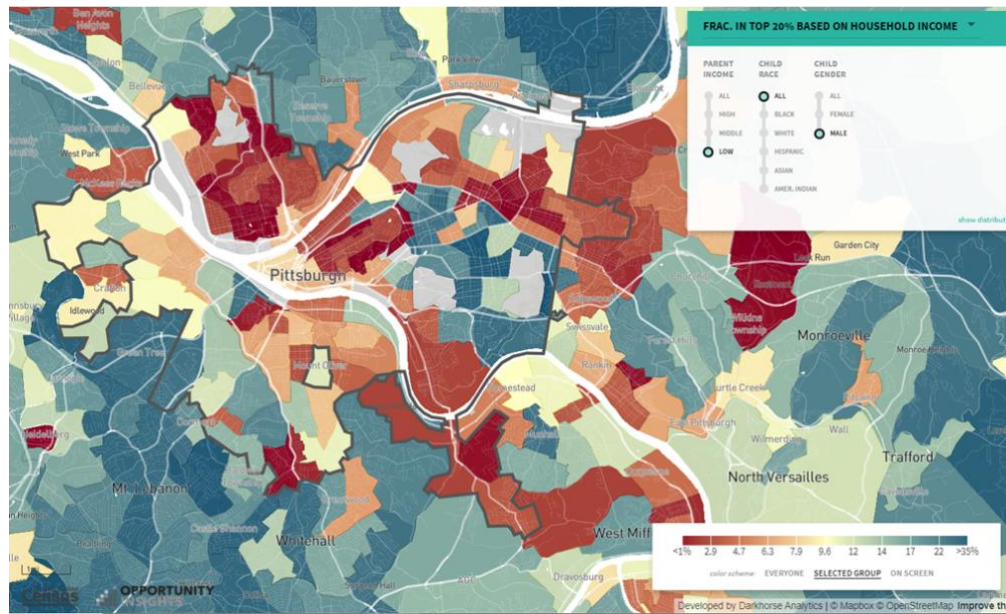
Table 2. Upward Mobility Rates for Low-Income Men, ND and SC Counties.

County	Upward Mobility (%)	County	Upward Mobility (%)
Dunn County, ND	44.98	Benson County, ND	8.53
Slope County, ND	44.70	Rolette County, ND	8.16
Burke County, ND	41.98	Beaufort County, SC	7.07
McKenzie County, ND	41.51	Lexington County, SC	6.27
Bowman County, ND	40.30	Horry County, SC	6.13
Mountrail County, ND	39.85	Dorchester County, SC	5.84
Stark County, ND	34.66	Georgetown County, SC	5.68
Williams County, ND	32.60	Clarendon County, SC	5.39
LaMoure County, ND	32.59	Berkeley County, SC	5.13
Hettinger County, ND	32.41	Kershaw County, SC	5.09
Steele County, ND	31.91	Charleston County, SC	5.08
Nelson County, ND	31.60	Colleton County, SC	4.97
Oliver County, ND	31.33	Aiken County, SC	4.86
Grant County, ND	30.70	Greenville County, SC	4.57
Divide County, ND	29.76	McCormick County, SC	4.57
Billings County, ND	29.70	York County, SC	4.48
McHenry County, ND	29.70	Orangeburg County, SC	4.35
Renville County, ND	29.70	Darlington County, SC	4.27
Adams County, ND	29.10	Florence County, SC	4.27
Trail County, ND	29.02	Oconee County, SC	4.25
Foster County, ND	28.13	Newberry County, SC	4.20
Mercer County, ND	28.01	Barnwell County, SC	4.19
Cavalier County, ND	27.09	Calhoun County, SC	4.08
Kidder County, ND	26.43	Pickens County, SC	4.01
Towner County, ND	26.22	Saluda County, SC	4.01
Bottineau County, ND	25.29	Chesterfield County, SC	3.95
Emmons County, ND	25.24	Spartanburg County, SC	3.89
Wells County, ND	22.56	Dillon County, SC	3.89
Dickey County, ND	21.90	Richland County, SC	3.89
McLean County, ND	21.88	Edgefield County, SC	3.87
McIntosh County, ND	21.37	Laurens County, SC	3.83
Logan County, ND	21.07	Jasper County, SC	3.76
Morton County, ND	21.07	Anderson County, SC	3.70
Burleigh County, ND	21.04	Greenwood County, SC	3.62
Ward County, ND	20.40	Lee County, SC	3.61
Griggs County, ND	19.49	Marion County, SC	3.57
Walsh County, ND	19.26	Marlboro County, SC	3.57
Pierce County, ND	18.88	Abbeville County, SC	3.56
Sheridan County, ND	18.54	Cherokee County, SC	3.49
Golden Valley County, ND	18.32	Williamsburg County, SC	3.44
Pembina County, ND	18.28	Sumter County, SC	3.35
Richland County, ND	16.37	Chester County, SC	3.14
Eddy County, ND	15.29	Fairfield County, SC	3.02
Stutsman County, ND	15.21	Sioux County, ND	3.01
Ransom County, ND	14.98	Union County, SC	2.88
Grand Forks County, ND	14.67	Lancaster County, SC	2.86
Cass County, ND	14.58	Bamberg County, SC	2.31
Ramsey County, ND	13.92	Hampton County, SC	2.26
Barnes County, ND	12.94	Allendale County, SC	1.57
Sargent County, ND	9.69		

Note: Light green indicates ND county, light orange indicates SC county. Average rate for all U.S. counties: 9.92%.

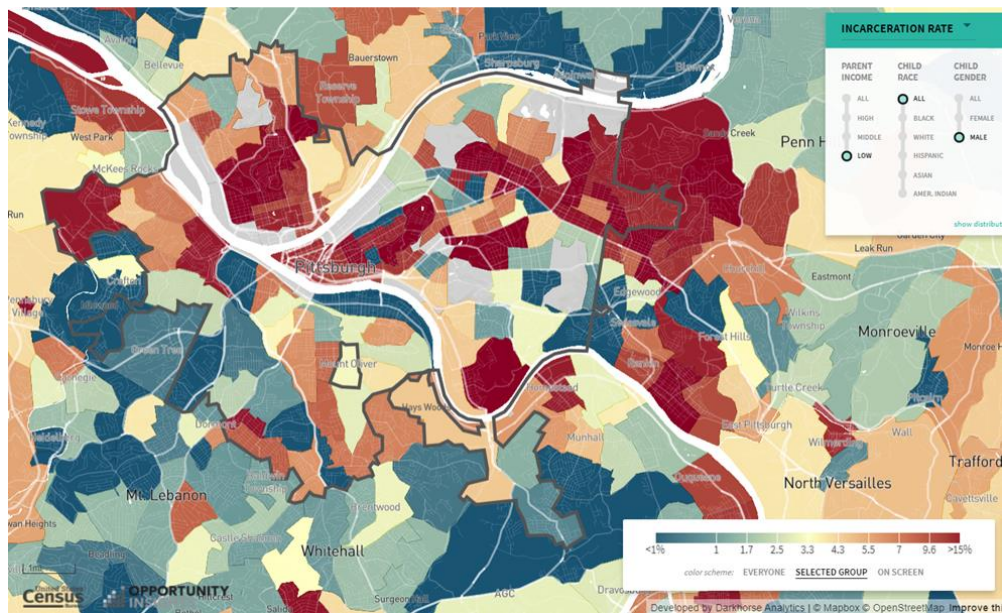
Source: Opportunity Insights 2020.

Figure 6. Upward Mobility Rates across Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



Source: Opportunity Insights (2020). Reprinted with permission.

Figure 7. Incarceration Rates across Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



Source: Opportunity Insights (2020). Reprinted with permission.

burdened with extraordinarily high rates of unemployment and poverty, as well as a number of other social problems.

Even within relatively small geographic areas, children from neighborhood to neighborhood have very different adult outcomes. Figures 6 and 7, for instance, show adult upward mobility rates and incarceration rates for low-income men raised in different neighborhoods in Pittsburgh, PA. In some of the most-advantaged areas, around half of low-income men rise to the top 20 percent in household income and less than one percent are incarcerated in early adulthood. In ten minutes or less by car, one can drive to less-advantaged areas only a few miles away in the same city where less than one percent of low-income men rise to the top and a third are incarcerated.

Massive economic inequality and unjust economic insecurity for some groups and not others must be addressed. Doing so is a matter of removing unfair restrictions on the freedoms of millions of Americans. As Franklin Roosevelt stated in his 1944 State of the Union Message to Congress, ‘We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence’ (1944).¹² And as Martin Luther King Jr. stated in 1968 during the Poor People’s Campaign, ‘What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?’ (1968/2015).

Another negative consequence of economic inequality is the manner in which it impairs the functioning and distorts the priorities of government. In the U.S., money equals a voice in the political system, meaning rising economic inequality undermines democracy. There is a close correlation between campaign funding levels and election outcomes. As political scientist Thomas Ferguson and his colleagues have demonstrated, ‘Campaign finance follows the basic axiom of the investment theory of politics,’ which holds that, ‘Campaigning isn’t free. . . either everyone pays a little to fund campaigns or a few pay for nearly everything—and control the system’ (2018). This is part of the reason why American politicians are disproportionately responsive to those with wealth and influence. Elites do not favor many of the social policies which aid and/or are popular among the middle- and lower-classes. Research shows that the consequence of this is that, most of the time, elites get what they want when their political preferences and interests diverge from the rest of the American population (Gilens 2012; Gilens & Page 2014).

Martin Gilens, summarizing his important research in this area, explains:

‘The central takeaway from my work is that affluent individuals and organized interest groups have considerable sway over federal policymaking, and ordinary citizens have essentially none. . . Not only did I find that poor people have essentially no influence over government policymaking, but middle-class Americans have essentially no influence as well. Whether those groups support a policy or oppose it seems to have virtually no bearing on the likelihood of that

¹² FDR called for a second Bill of Rights, including the rights to a good education, a job at a living wage, a decent home, good health, adequate medical care, and protection from economic insecurity. These rights were to be ‘established for all regardless of station, race, or creed’ (Roosevelt 1944).

policy being adopted once you take into account the preferences of the affluent and of interest groups.’¹³

We clearly need to reform our political system and get money out of politics in order to help make our country truly democratic. But reducing economic inequality would also contribute in significant ways.

Whether dealing with issues like violence, social mobility, or the responsiveness of government, among a number of others, it is imperative that we get a handle on our very high level of economic inequality in the U.S. There are a variety of methods that we could turn to, including restoring the power of labor unions,¹⁴ building a robust vocational-education system, expanding and redesigning the social welfare system (including things like better income supports and unemployment assistance, universal healthcare, child allowances, subsidized childcare and early childhood education, and/or paid parental leave), adjusting the tax system in a more progressive direction, creating more democratic workplaces, increasing the minimum wage, bolstering the manufacturing sector where possible, and reducing the influence of money in politics, to name a few. Some efforts will require significant international coordination, however, such as combatting off-shore tax havens (unfortunately, the U.S. is currently retreating from international obligations and becoming a much less cooperative global citizen).

No desirable future society is fully possible unless we eliminate other key forms of domination as well, including racial inequality. Like economic inequality, racial inequality constrains freedom for millions of Americans. For the sake of our discussion, we will focus on inequalities between Black and White¹⁵ Americans, although important inequalities facing Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and others are important as well and would certainly warrant discussion.

¹³ Interview conducted by the authors for this article.

¹⁴ Colin Gordon notes that, ‘One hallmark of the first 30 years after World War II was the ‘countervailing power’ of labor unions (not just at the bargaining table but in local, state, and national politics) and their ability to raise wages and working standards for members and non-members alike. . . Labor unions both sustained prosperity, and ensured that it was shared. . . There is a demonstrable wage premium for union workers. . . and even spills over and benefits non-union workers. The wage effect alone underestimates the union contribution to shared prosperity. Unions at midcentury also exerted considerable political clout, sustaining other political and economic choices (minimum wage, job-based health benefits, Social Security, high marginal tax rates, etc.) that dampened inequality. And unions not only raise the wage floor but can also lower the ceiling. . . Over the second 30 years post-WWII. . . labor’s bargaining power collapsed. . . As a result, union membership has fallen and income inequality has worsened—reaching levels not seen since the 1920s. . . By most estimates, declining unionization accounted for about a third of the increase in inequality in the 1980s and 1990s’ (2012). David Brady demonstrated a strong association between poverty and labor union membership cross-nationally ($r = -0.51$), as well as associations between poverty and a proportional representation form of government ($r = -0.63$), a history of strong female representation in government (-0.58), a history of left-leaning governments ($r = -0.55$), and voter turnout ($r = -0.43$) (2009, pp. 109-113). He also shows that welfare generosity is a much better predictor of poverty cross-nationally than economic growth or demographic characteristics (Brady 2009; Brady et. al. 2017).

¹⁵ We capitalize Black as a sign of respect, and we capitalize White, in the words of Eve L. Ewing, to avoid giving Whiteness power by allowing it to remain supposedly neutral and invisible, to avoid ‘reinforcing the dangerous myth that White people in America do not have a racial identity. . . Whiteness is not only an absence. . . Rather, it is a specific social category that confers identifiable and measureable social benefits’ (Ewing 2020). We realize there is considerable debate about capitalization, and this is certainly not the only manner in which to handle this use of language. We do not make this language choice lightly, and our choice is not authoritative.

While some Whites label anyone who argues that racism is still a central factor determining the life chances of Americans as ‘playing the race card,’ such inequalities are nonetheless stark, they have a profound and demonstrable impact on one’s adult outcomes, and their causes are largely structural.

Black Americans are much more likely to grow up in struggling residential environments, with over three out of four Black children growing up in highly-disadvantaged neighborhoods, compared to only about one in twenty White children (Sharkey 2009, p. 10).¹⁶ As Ta-Nehisi Coates explains, in the U.S., ‘the concentration of poverty has been paired with a concentration of melanin’ (2014). Around half of Black families live in poor neighborhoods over consecutive generations, compared to only seven percent of White families (Sharkey 2013, p. 39). A majority of African American families (67%) who start out in poor neighborhoods remain there in the next generation, but only a minority of White families (40%). Likewise, Black families who start out in affluent neighborhoods are less likely to remain there in the next generation (39%) compared to Whites (63%) (Sharkey 2013, p. 38). Even for children in Black families with high incomes (in the top three quintiles), around half (49 percent) live in high-poverty neighborhoods, compared to only one percent of White children in similarly high-income families (Sharkey 2009, pp. 2-3).¹⁷ As scholar Patrick Sharkey explains:

‘blacks and whites of similar economic status live in dramatically different residential environments, with blacks living in areas with higher crime rates, lower quality schools, higher poverty rates, lower property values, and severe racial segregation. Even if blacks are able to make gains in economic or social status in one generation, they often remain in social environments that are disadvantaged across multiple dimensions, and that may make it more difficult to transmit advantages to the next generation’ (2009, p. 6).

As Sharkey notes, African Americans are confronted with a form of concentrated and multi-generational disadvantage that is not really characteristic of the experience of virtually any other group in the U.S. outside of the marginalization of many Native Americans in reservation territories. And this place-based disadvantage matters a great deal for the life chances of citizens who live there, as researchers have ‘steadily piled up evidence of how important social context, social institutions, and social networks—in short, our communities—remain for our well-being and our kids’ opportunities’ (Putnam 2015, p. 206).

The highly-unequal residential conditions faced by Black Americans compared to White Americans include inequalities in a variety of neighborhood characteristics, including income/wealth and educational attainment of neighbors, degree of segregation and inequality, quality of institutions (such as childcares, churches, health services, parks, police, etc.), stability of neighborhood populations, available peer networks, available adult role models and adult

¹⁶ These neighborhoods not only have high poverty rates, but also have high rates of unemployment, welfare receipt, single motherhood, and racial segregation.

¹⁷ Sharkey notes that many middle-class Black families live in ‘spatial proximity to extremely poor, disadvantaged areas,’ which makes it ‘difficult for middle-class blacks to create separation from the problems of the ghetto, including poor-performing schools, gangs, drug markets, and violence’ (2009, p. 6).

supervision,¹⁸ degree of social cohesion (including trust, collective efficacy, social support, social connectedness, shared norms and expectations, formal and informal social control, etc.),¹⁹ prevalence of violence and gangs, quality of leadership, amount of political power, exposure to environmental burdens,²⁰ predominant family structures, local marriage and labor markets, characteristics of nearby neighborhoods, foreclosure/vacancy/eviction rates, housing density, and perceptions of order/disorder (including prevalence of garbage, vacant lots, rundown buildings, etc.).²¹

In addition to facing more concentrated disadvantage, African Americans also face it for a longer duration of time and are more likely to face it across generations than Whites—which studies clearly link to adverse outcomes (Sharkey and Faber 2014).

This concentrated disadvantage has a devastating impact on the development, well-being, and life chances of Black children, including their cognitive skills, educational attainment,²² physical and mental health, economic performance, chances of social mobility, and likelihood of criminal involvement/victimization and incarceration.

In a well-known report from the United Church of Christ, researchers demonstrated that neighborhoods with commercial hazardous waste facilities in the U.S. were 56 percent non-White, compared to 30 percent in non-host neighborhoods. In areas with multiple facilities, the percentage non-White was an unconscionable 69 percent. Poverty rates were 1.5 times greater in host areas compared to non-host areas, and 1.8 times greater in neighborhoods with multiple facilities (UCC 2007, pp. 53-54, 73).

In another study, researchers demonstrated the stark inequalities in lead exposure that exist between racial groups in the U.S.:

¹⁸ Sampson explains that, ‘Seemingly banal acts such as the collective supervision of children and adult mentorship add up to make a difference’ (2019, p. 12).

¹⁹ Putnam (2015) notes wide gaps in social ties with college professors (21% for high school educated parents compared to 71% for college educated parents), lawyers (50% compared to 82%), and CEOs (22% compared to 44%). He shows that residents in wealthy neighborhoods were more than twice as likely to trust their neighbors compared to those living in poor neighborhoods (Putnam 2015, p. 219). And he showed that 64 percent of high-SES children have non-family mentors, but only 40 percent of low-SES children (Putnam 2015, p. 215).

²⁰ At one school in New York City, the students in the classrooms closest to noise from a nearby elevated train were three to four months behind their peers on the quieter side of school (Bronzaft and McCarthy 1975).

²¹ As Chase Sackett explains, ‘strong evidence indicates that shared *perceptions* of past disorder (that is, what people thought about a neighborhood years ago) are a better predictor of homicides in neighborhoods than are present levels of physical disorder.’ He goes on to talk about vacant lots and foreclosures, noting that, ‘Vacancies and evictions can also lead to violent crime by destabilizing communities and creating venues for crime. A study of Pittsburgh found that violent crime increased by 19 percent within 250 feet of a newly vacant foreclosed home and that the crime rate increased the longer the property remained vacant. In 2016’s *Evicted*, Desmond notes that Milwaukee neighborhoods in the mid-2000s with high eviction rates had higher violent crime rates the following year after controlling for factors including past crime rates. Desmond suggests that eviction affects crime by frustrating the relationship among neighbors and preventing the development of community efficacy that could prevent violence’ (2016).

²² As Pierre Bourdieu notes, ‘the educational capital held at a given moment expresses, among other things, the economic and social level of the family of origin’ (1984, p. 105), and the educational system tends to ‘sanction and to reproduce the distribution of cultural capital by proportioning academic success to the amount of cultural capital bequeathed by the family’ (1977, p. 497).

‘Drawing on comprehensive data from over one million blood tests administered to Chicago children from 1995 to 2013 and matched to over 2,300 geographic block groups, we found that black and Hispanic neighbourhoods exhibited extraordinarily high rates of lead toxicity compared with white neighbourhoods, in some cases with prevalence rates topping 90% of the child population’ (Sampson 2019, p. 14).

Black children are not just segregated in more disadvantaged neighborhoods but also in lower-quality schools. As one example, Black public school children are 5.5 times more likely to attend a high-poverty school compared to Whites—in fact, it is the *norm* for Black students to attend schools where most students qualify for free/reduced school lunches (74% attend such schools), but not so for White students (only 31% attend such schools) (NCES 2019a, p. 70). In another example, the average Black student attends a public school in the 37th percentile rank on state exams, compared to the 60th percentile for the average White student (Rothwell 2012, p. 9).

As mentioned previously, 78 percent of Black children grow up in highly-disadvantaged neighborhoods, compared to only five percent of Whites (Sharkey 2009, p. 10). This is extraordinarily problematic for a variety of reasons, including risk of criminal involvement and victimization, as ‘concentrated disadvantage remains a strong predictor of violent crime’ (Sampson 2019, p. 13), and, ‘Concentrated disadvantage, crime, and imprisonment appear to interact in a continually destabilizing feedback loop’ (Sackett 2016).²³ Researchers recently calculated that childhood poverty alone in the U.S. leads to increased corrections and crime deterrence costs, increased incarceration costs, and increased victimization costs to the tune of slightly over \$400 billion a year (Rank 2020).

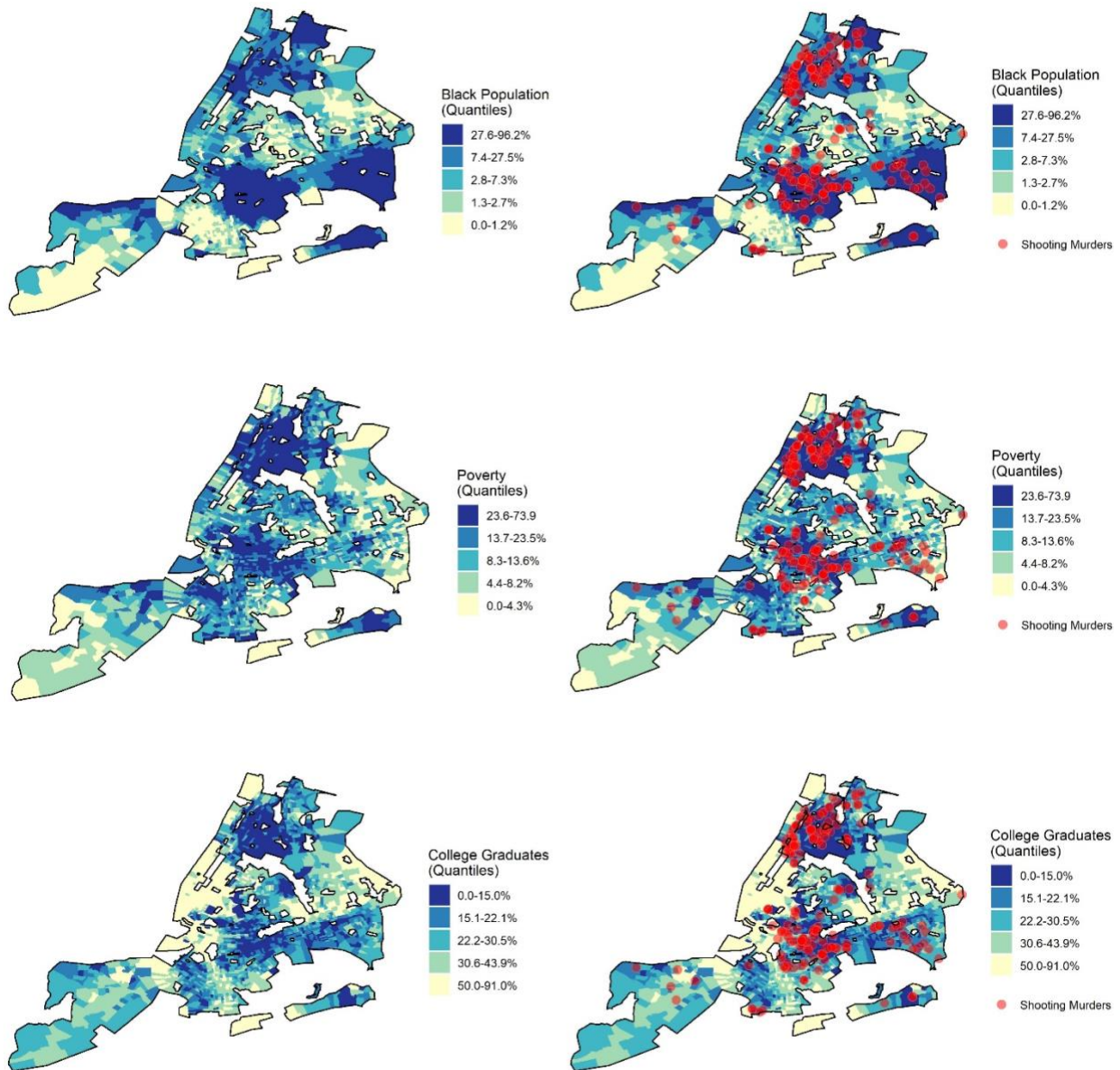
As Sharkey demonstrated by mapping homicides and poverty across Chicago, there is a ‘strikingly visible’ (2013, p. 30) association between neighborhood poverty and violence:

‘the concentration of violence goes hand in hand with the concentration of poverty. There is a remarkable spatial clustering of homicides in and around neighborhoods with high levels of poverty. . . there are entire sections of this violent city where the most extreme form of violence, a local homicide, is an unknown occurrence. There are other neighborhoods where homicides are a common feature of life. . . these maps provide perhaps the most vivid portrait of what living in areas of concentrated poverty can mean in America’s cities’ (2013, p. 30).

Our own analyses reveal the same visible overlap between racial segregation, concentrated disadvantage, and violence across a number of American cities. As one example, Figure 8 focuses on New York City. This figure demonstrates the extraordinary overlap between clusters of gun homicides and areas of disproportionately high concentrations of Black residents, poverty, and

²³ As Sharkey and his colleagues explain, ‘crime is clustered in space to a remarkable degree’ (2016, p. 629). Sackett explains that, ‘Neighborhoods with more concentrated disadvantage tend to experience higher levels of violent crime. Numerous studies, for instance, show that neighborhoods with higher poverty rates tend to have higher rates of violent crime. Greater overall income inequality within a neighborhood is associated with higher rates of crime, especially violent crime. Sampson notes that even though the city of Stockholm has far less violence, segregation, and inequality than the city of Chicago, in both cities a disproportionate number of homicides occur in a very small number of very disadvantaged neighborhoods’ (2016).

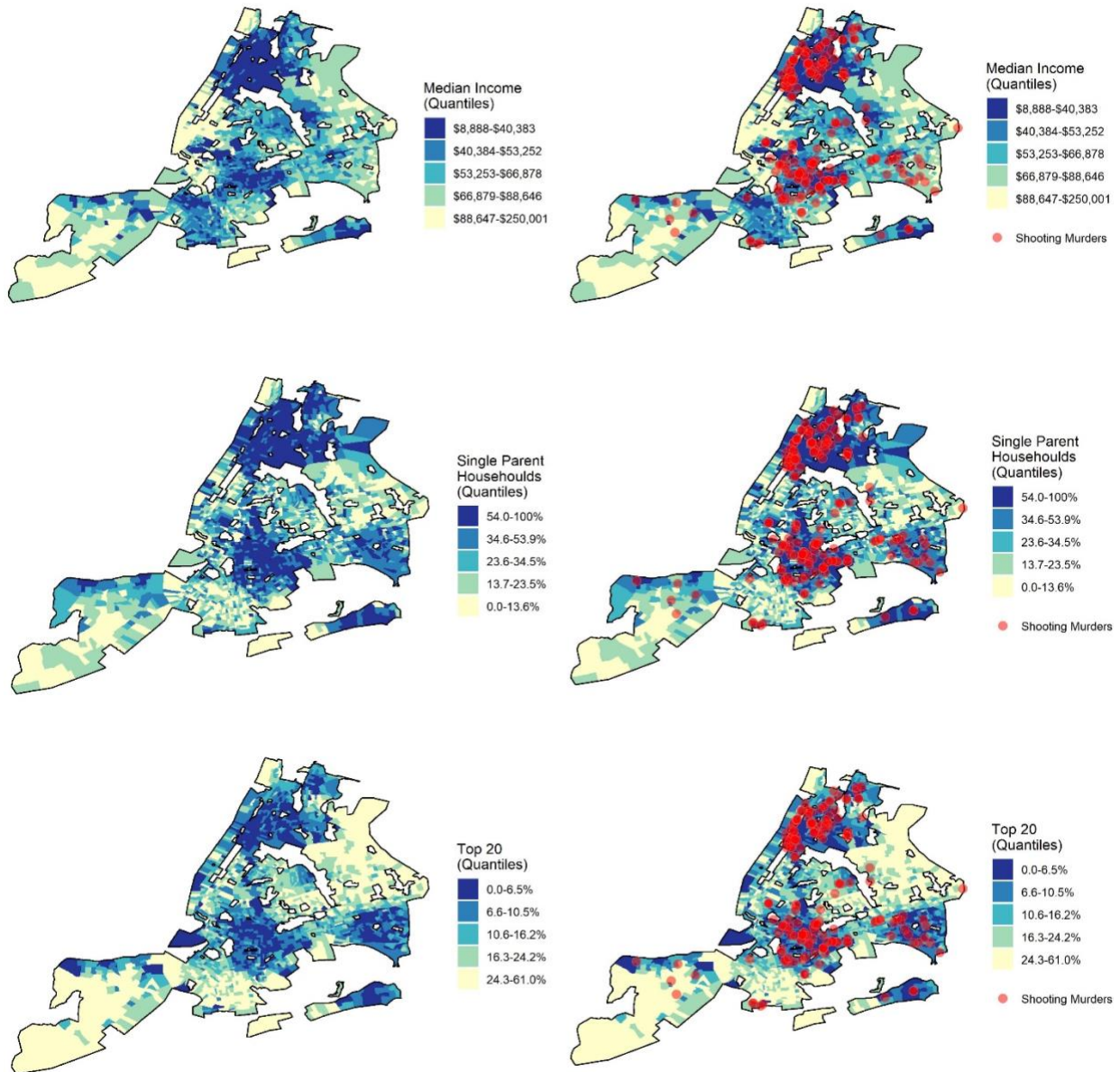
Figure 8. Concentrated Disadvantage and Gun Homicides in New York City.



Note: Maps in Figure 8 include all gun murders during Jan. 1 to Dec. 31, 2019 time period. “Black population” is the percentage of the population in these tracts who are African American. “Poverty” is poverty rate for tract. “College graduates” is college graduation rate for tract. Race, poverty, and college data most recent available.

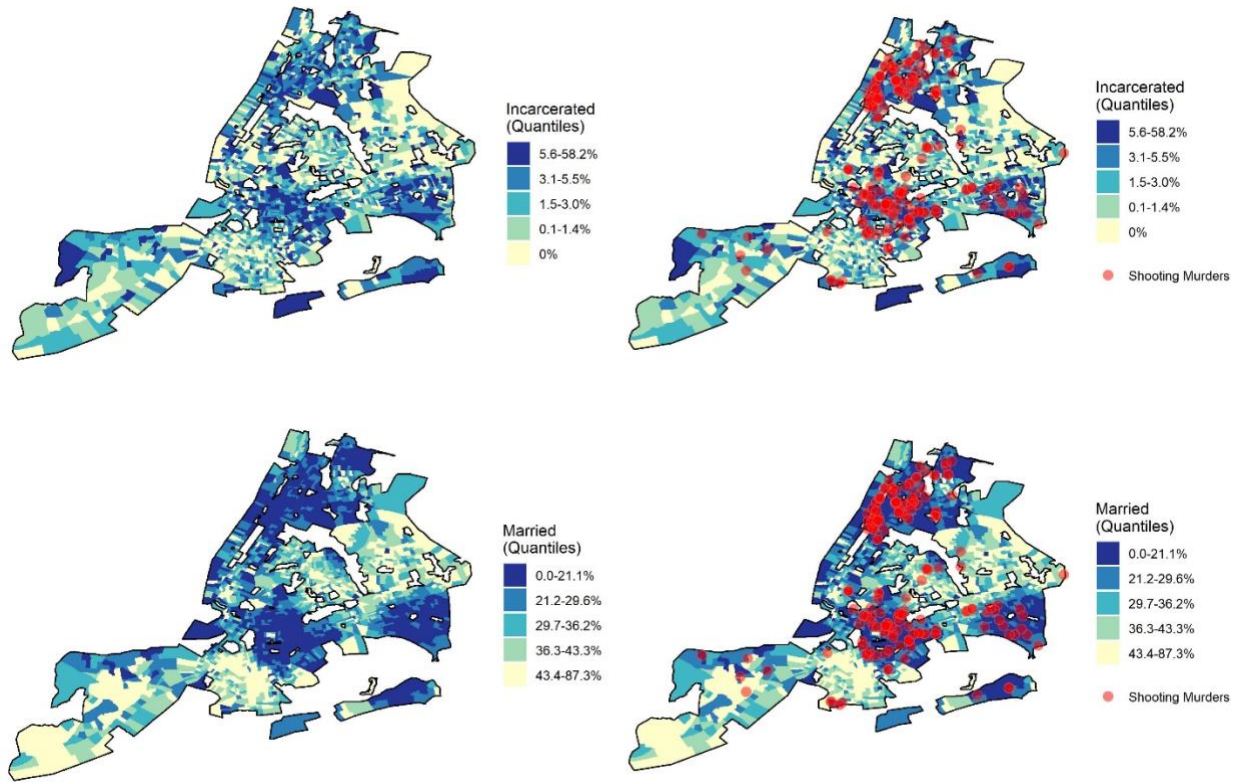
Source: Authors created maps using NYC (2020) and Opportunity Insights (2020) data.

Figure 8 (cont.). Concentrated Disadvantage and Gun Homicides in New York City.



Note: “Median income” is median total household income of tract households. “Single parent households” is the percentage of heads of households with children in these tracts who are single. “Top 20” refers to men raised in low-income families in these tracts who rose to top 20 percent in total household income in early adulthood. Income and single parenthood data most recent available.

Figure 8 (cont.). Concentrated Disadvantage and Gun Homicides in New York City.



Note: “Incarcerated” is the percentage of men raised in low-income families in these tracts who are incarcerated in early adulthood. “Married” is the percentage of men raised in low-income families in these tracts who are married in early adulthood.

single parenthood, and low concentrations of college graduates, high-income earners, and upwardly-mobile residents. Our analyses reveal that such overlap is present not only in New York City, but is typical in a number of American cities. In Figure 8, you'll notice that, not only does violence overlap with all of these measures of disadvantage, but all of these measures of disadvantage *overlap with each other*. Research suggests that each individual dimension of disadvantage constrains people's agency in significant ways independently of other dimensions—so facing multiple dimensions, as these residents do, makes life significantly more difficult than facing any one dimension individually. Research suggests that it is areas like these, which are burdened with not just one but several disadvantages, where violence seems to crop up most.

Low-income Americans are three times more likely to be assaulted each year compared to high-income Americans (Kearney et. al. 2014). Males born into families in the bottom income decile are about 20 times more likely to be in prison in their 30s compared to males born into families in the top decile. In fact, almost one in ten American boys born to families in the bottom income decile are incarcerated at age 30. A disproportionate share of incarcerated Americans were raised in economically-distressed neighborhoods with high child poverty, single parenthood, and unemployment, as well as a disproportionate number of non-White residents (and African American or Native American residents in particular). Incarceration rates of children from single-parent families are about double the rates of children from two-parent families, even when income is accounted for. Three years prior to incarceration, only about half (49%) of prime-age men are employed, and for those who are employed, their median earnings are \$6,250, with only 13 percent earning more than \$15,000. (Looney and Turner 2018, pp. 1-2). Studies show that crime is associated with public assistance payment schedules, with crime increasing as assistance depletes and residents await their next payment. Other studies show that offenders released from prison and given adequate economic resources are less likely to commit a crime compared to those who do not receive such assistance (Sharkey et. al. 2016).

Despite making up only about 13 percent of the U.S. population, Black Americans are a slight majority of murder victims (52%) and a disproportionately-high proportion of perpetrators (39%) (FBI 2019). This is of course *not* because African Americans are more prone to violence, but because violence is prone to erupt in areas of intense disadvantage—and a history of systemic racism has geographically segregated Black Americans in such areas. That concentrated disadvantage is the real culprit, as Chase Sackett explains:

'predominantly African-American neighborhoods (those that consist of more than 70% African-American residents) averaged five times as many violent crimes as predominantly white communities; predominantly Latino neighborhoods averaged about two and a half times as many violent crimes as predominantly white neighborhoods. These differences in crime rates are linked to structural disparities: segregated neighborhoods also tend to be disadvantaged and lack access to community resources, institutions, and means of social control such as effective policing as well as social trust' (2016).

Although violent crime is racialized due to systemic inequalities in the distribution of resources and opportunities in the U.S., it should be noted that very few African Americans actually commit violent crimes. Black Americans were responsible for 6,318 murders in 2018 (out of 16,335 total

homicides) (FBI 2019). If all of those murders were committed by a single individual, that would represent less than 0.00015 percent of the Black population (which consists of over 40 million people) who committed a murder. So despite the disproportionate share of perpetrators who are Black, we are talking about an extraordinarily small percentage of the Black population overall.

Additionally, a quarter of homicides in the U.S. occur in a geographic area that contains only 1.5 percent of the country's population. If placed side-by-side, this area would be no more than 42 miles wide by 42 miles long. Residents in these areas are overwhelmed by problems of concentrated disadvantage like deep poverty, low levels of educational attainment, and significant racial segregation (Aufrechtig et. al. 2017). And even among the American cities where most violence is concentrated, it occurs in only a small sliver of those cities, the areas with the most serious deprivation.

Studies show that violent crime tends to be concentrated within narrow social networks as well as geographic 'hot spots' or 'micro places,' what we might refer to as the 'law of crime concentration' (Weisburd 2015). In one study of Boston data from an almost 30-year period, for instance, more than half of all incidents of gun violence could be attributed to fewer than three percent of micro places in the city. Another study in the same city found that about 85 percent of gunshot injuries occurred within a single network of people, and this network represented less than six percent of the city's population (Sackett 2016). In a similar study of Oakland, researchers found that networks of high-risk residents representing just 0.3 percent of the city's population were responsible for around 60 percent of the city's murders. In New Orleans, less than one percent of the city's population was responsible for most murders. In another study of Chicago and Oakland, nearly 70 percent of all census tracts in the two cities recorded zero gun homicides, while 13 percent of census tracts were responsible for the majority of gun homicides (Aufrechtig et. al. 2017).²⁴

Crime is not a 'Black problem' but instead a problem of concentrated disadvantage. In fact, when researchers control for the unequal neighborhood and community burdens that Black Americans face compared to Whites, racial differences in criminal involvement are dramatically reduced—and controlling for other structural inequalities would eliminate such racial differences entirely (Peeples and Loeber 1994; Alexander 2010; Peterson and Krivo 2010).

But while crime is not a 'Black problem,' the concentrated disadvantage that causes it is overwhelmingly and unjustly contained in Black communities.

Until we dismantle the mechanisms which concentrate disadvantage in non-White communities, such disparities in crime will not disappear. As scholar Robert Sampson explains, 'racial disparities in violent crime rates [are] attributable in large part to the persistent structural disadvantages disproportionately concentrated in African American communities' (2019, p. 12), and 'race is not a direct cause of violence, but is rather a marker for the cluster of social and material disadvantages that both follow from and constitute racial status in America' (2019, p. 13). Or as scholar Lauren Krivo explains, racialized violence in the U.S. is:

²⁴ As Kennedy notes, 'In what we think of as the 'most dangerous places', very, very few people are actually at any meaningful risk for violent offending. . . Most of the folks in those places are in no way a part of the problem' (Aufrechtig et. al. 2017).

‘not about race, per se, it’s about how other conditions are racialized, are racially inequitable. . . few predominantly white communities have conditions that are anywhere near the levels of disadvantage that are common in non-white communities, and particularly black communities’ (Aufrichtig et. al. 2017).

Like violence, educational attainment and chances of social mobility are significantly impacted by residential conditions as well.

Geoffrey Wodtke and his colleagues (2011) demonstrated that living in disadvantaged neighborhoods can significantly reduce the probability of high school graduation. Their data showed that growing up in the most disadvantaged quintile of neighborhoods, compared to the most advantaged, reduced the probability of high school graduation from 96 to 76 percent for Black children in their study. The researchers explained their findings, saying that:

‘Our results indicate that sustained exposure to disadvantaged neighborhoods—characterized by high poverty, unemployment, and welfare receipt; many female-headed households; and few well-educated adults—throughout the entire childhood life course has a devastating impact on the chances of graduating from high school’ (Wodtke et. al. 2011, p. 731).

Sharkey (2013) found that children performed best on tests of cognitive skills (these students scored well above average) when neither they nor any of their parents were raised in a high-poverty neighborhood. Scores dropped significantly if the child or one of their parents (but not both child and parent) was raised in a high-poverty neighborhood. Scores then dropped considerably more (this last group was well below average) if a child and at least one of their parents were raised in a high-poverty neighborhood (Sharkey 2013, p. 119). These gaps represented the equivalent of missing three or four years of schooling.

Heather Schwartz (2010) examined the school performance of 850 students living in public housing in the same county but who had been randomly assigned to different neighborhoods and thus different schools. She found that the children who attended the most-advantaged schools in the district performed far better in math and reading than their counterparts assigned to the district’s least-advantaged schools.

Sean Reardon’s research (2016) has demonstrated a very strong relationship between the socioeconomic status of school districts and the average academic achievement of their students ($r = 0.78$). Reardon found that, ‘Students in many of the most advantaged school districts have test scores that are more than four grade levels above those of students in the most disadvantaged districts’ (2016, p. 7).

In a notable 2014 study, Raj Chetty and his colleagues calculated the variables most strongly associated with differences in upward mobility across American commuting zones, finding that variables such as fraction of children with single mothers ($r = -0.76$), fraction middle class ($r = 0.68$), social capital ($r = 0.64$), test score percentile ($r = 0.59$), income inequality ($r = -0.58$), fraction Black residents ($r = -0.58$), high school dropout rate ($r = -0.57$), fraction married ($r = 0.57$), and fraction religious ($r = 0.52$) were particularly important (Online Appendix Table VIII). One

of their many interesting findings was that a community's single parenthood rate was not only strongly correlated with upward mobility for all children ($r = -0.76$), but also for children with married parents ($r = -0.66$) (Chetty et. al. 2014, Online Appendix Figure XII). Summarizing this work, Chetty explained:

'we find a strong negative correlation between standard measures of racial and income segregation and upward mobility. . . These findings lead us to identify segregation as the first of five major factors that are strongly correlated with mobility. The second factor we explore is inequality. [Commuting zones] with larger Gini coefficients have less upward mobility, consistent with the 'Great Gatsby curve'. . . Third, proxies for the quality of the K-12 school system are also correlated with mobility. . . Fourth, social capital indices—which are proxies for the strength of social networks and community involvement in an area—are very strongly correlated with mobility. . . Finally, the strongest predictors of upward mobility are measures of family structure such as the fraction of single parents in the area' (2014, pp. 5-6).

The correlations revealed in the analyses by Chetty and his colleagues are particularly alarming given that the higher the proportion of African Americans in a neighborhood, the more of these obstacles that are present there (see Table 3).

Figure 9 demonstrates the strong relationship ($r = -0.51$) between county of origin single parenthood rates and upward mobility rates (rising into the top 20% in total household income) for men from low-income backgrounds across the U.S.

Social groups are historical phenomena which 'in fact [happen] (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships' (Thompson 1966, p. 9). As Ta-Nehisi Coates explains, 'race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming 'the people' has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy' (2015, p. 7). A history of systemic racism in the U.S. has created our current social conditions and social groups. Despite being socially constructed, however, racial hierarchies create realities that produce consequences. A history of racism in the U.S. means that compared to Whites, Black Americans, on average, inherit lower social positions, grow up in much more disadvantaged neighborhoods, attend lower-quality schools,²⁵ and have access to far fewer resources and opportunities, in addition to facing documented discrimination in a variety of social arenas (including employment).²⁶

²⁵ Poor schools often have to rely on less-experienced and/or less-effective teachers (Putnam 2015, pp. 172-173). In poorer schools, students also tend to be exposed to student populations with a variety of characteristics which 'rub off' on them, including lower expectations, fewer family resources to share, and less middle-class-approved behavior to model. Putnam (2015, p. 170) showed that suspensions are two and a half times more common and classroom problems four times more common in high- versus low-poverty schools.

²⁶ As one example, Devah Pager's research (2009) suggests that Black job applicants without a criminal record fare no better than equivalently-credentialed White applicants *with a felony conviction*. Subsequent research suggests that this discrimination actually *increases significantly* after the callback during the actual job interview itself (Quillian et. al. 2020).

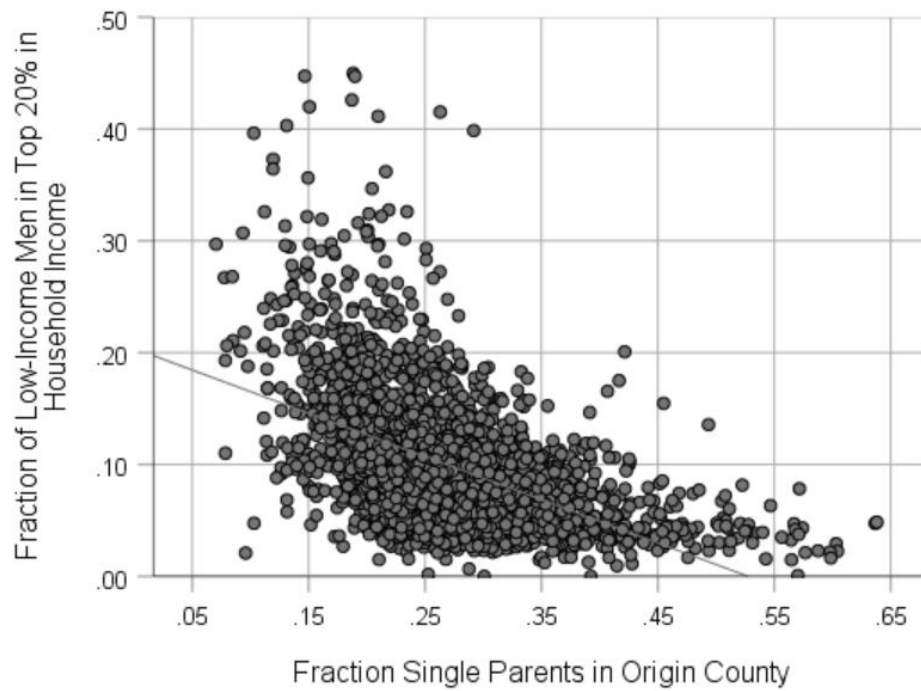
Table 3. Neighborhood Disadvantage by Proportion African American in the U.S.

	Fraction Adults College Grads (avg. %)	Median Household Income (avg. \$)	Poverty Rate (avg. %)	3rd Grade Math Scores (avg. score)	Single Parenthood Rate (avg. %)
Percentage Black in Tract					
Black \geq 90%	12	29,945	33	2.03	74
Black \geq 75%	14	33,415	30	2.23	70
Black \geq 50%	15	35,512	29	2.38	64
Black \geq 30%	17	38,515	26	2.55	58
Black \leq 10%	30	64,815	12	3.38	27
All U.S. Tracts	27	58,810	15	3.19	33

Note: A math score of 3 or above would be considered proficient. A math score less than 3 would not be considered proficient.

Source: Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2020) data.

Figure 9. Association between Origin County Single Parenthood Rates and Upward Mobility Rates for Men from Low-Income Families in the U.S.



Note: $r = -0.51$ ($p < .001$).

Source: Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2020) data.

This explains why Black Americans lag behind Whites on indicators such as educational attainment, health, income/wealth, marriage rates, and criminal involvement. These inequalities are appalling—compared to Whites, Black Americans are much more likely to be born in the bottom income quintile (42% of Black men, for instance, compared to only 12% of White men), have almost three times the child poverty rate, 2.3 times the infant mortality rate, worse high school and college completion rates, one-tenth the wealth as adults and around 60 percent of the median household income, shorter life expectancies, 2.6 times the poverty rate, 2.7 times the single-parent hood rate, and massively disproportionate criminal involvement/victimization and incarceration rates (Winship et. al. 2018; Arias and Xu 2019; FBI 2019; Gramlich 2019; Ingraham 2019; NCES 2019b; U.S. Census Bureau 2019; Kids Count 2020a, 2020b, and 2020c). Sixty-two percent of White children and 41 percent of Black children are meeting key benchmarks in early childhood—a number that remains largely unchanged for Whites in adulthood (63%), but falls to 28 percent for Black Americans (Reeves 2013). Racial inequalities are so pronounced that Black children born into the middle class are likely to fall out of the middle class in adulthood, while White children born there are likely to either stay in the middle class or rise higher (Pew Charitable Trusts 2012, p. 21).

The life expectancies of poor Black Americans in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the U.S. are comparable (or lower) than those in a number of poor and developing countries (Ingraham 2015). Christopher Ingraham gives a good example:

‘let’s look at a hypothetical case of two babies born on the same day this year in Baltimore. One is born in Roland Park, a wealthy neighborhood in the north of the city. The other is born just three miles away in Downtown/Seton Hill, one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. The Roland Park baby will most likely live to the age of 84, well above the U.S. average of 79. The Seton Hill baby, on the other hand, can expect to die 19 years earlier at the age of 65. That’s 14 years below the U.S. average. The average child born this year in Seton Hill will be dead before she can even begin to collect Social Security. . . If Roland Park’s life expectancy is similar to Japan’s, then Downtown/Seton Hill would be closest to Yemen. Roland Park would be the 4th longest-living country in the world, while Seton Hill would be the 230th. Fourteen Baltimore neighborhoods have lower life expectancies than North Korea. Eight are doing worse than Syria’ (2015).

Despite all of these data, majorities of Whites deny that their race makes it easier for them to achieve the American Dream (76%), that racial inequalities in educational access are a problem (75%), that racial discrimination in hiring is a problem (67%), and that there is racial bias in policing (52%) (*Atlantic/Aspen* 2015; Gallup 2020c).²⁷ Even in late May/early June 2020, in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd, only about half (49%) of Whites reported that police officers were more likely to use excessive force if the culprit was Black. Yet 71 percent of White respondents said that racial and ethnic discrimination in the U.S. was a big problem (Monmouth 2020). This suggests a very empty definition of racism, one that ignores the vast majority of mechanisms responsible for the glaring disparities that exist in American society, and recognizes only the most overt and egregious individual supposed ‘bad apples’ as problematic.

²⁷ And we should add that research suggests that surveys likely *underestimate* the amount of prejudice in the U.S. See Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000.

In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. stated that:

‘We are tired. We are tired of being at the bottom. We are tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. We are tired of our children having to attend overcrowded, inferior, quality-less schools. We are tired of having to live in dilapidated substandard housing conditions where we won’t have wall-to-wall carpet but so often we end up with wall-to-wall rats and roaches. We are tired of smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society. We are tired of walking the streets in search for jobs that do not exist’ (1968/2015).

Given the statistics we have cited on racial inequality, it is difficult to read these words from more than a half-century ago and not wonder: when are things *really* going to change?

The economic and racial inequalities outlined here (along with other forms of inequality, including those based on gender and sexual orientation) are forms of structural violence, or:

‘the avoidable limitations society places on groups of people that constrain them from achieving the quality of life that would have otherwise been possible. These limitations could be political, economic, religious, cultural, or legal in nature and usually originate in institutions that have authority over particular subjects. Because of its embedding within social structures, people tend to overlook them as ordinary difficulties that they encounter in the course of life. A sample scenario might be when people desperately need education, healthcare, political power, or legal assistance but are unable to access them easily. Unlike the more visible forms of violence where one person perpetrates physical harm on another, structural violence occurs through economically, politically, or culturally driven processes working together to limit subjects from achieving full quality of life. . . Structural violence directly illustrates a power system wherein social structures or institutions cause harm to people in a way that results in maldevelopment or deprivation. Because it is a product of human decisions and not natural occurrences, and because it is correctable and preventable through human agency, there is increasing advocacy that we call it violence’ (B. Lee 2016, p. 110).

Systemic racism cannot be overcome with good intentions. We must do the hard work of dismantling the racial structure of the country, including the practices, institutions, and culture responsible for the reproduction of racial inequality. If we want police officers to treat Black Americans fairly, for instance, we cannot wait until those officers are adults—after spending a lifetime learning a racial grammar which questions the humanity of African Americans and conflates Blackness with criminality—and hope to rewire their entire worldview. We need to build a society which does not teach children that Black men are to be feared—a lesson that is not specific to cops, but something that is a part of White socialization in America. We need a society which distributes child development and access to resources and opportunities fairly, so that one group does not end up so far behind another that they arouse suspicion by virtue of those gaps. We need a society that is not so rife with prejudice that conscious and unconscious discrimination are

inevitable.²⁸ And of course, we need accountability in a variety of social arenas, particular ones like the criminal justice system, where faulty racial grammar can have the most devastating consequences.

The road to real racial equality will be paved with the blood, sweat, and tears of communities of color and their allies. As Fredrick Douglass said more than a century ago, ‘Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will’ (1857). This remains true today. We should demand that our government do all that can be reasonably expected in order to dismantle the practices, institutions, and culture responsible for social, economic, political, and cultural domination. In the absence of serious and sustained action, our government is intentionally allowing true freedom to elude the grasp of millions of Americans today, and their children and grandchildren in the future.

Climate Change and Freedom

Every country in the world needs to contribute to combatting climate change. It will take nothing short of a coordinated global effort. Unfortunately, the U.S. is undermining this effort and threatening the health of the planet’s ecosystems and societies for future generations. This is particularly unjust, considering the disproportionately large impact the U.S. has on climate change—it has the fourth-highest carbon dioxide emissions per capita, and the second-highest carbon dioxide emissions overall, *in the world* (UCS 2020) (see Figure 10).

There is significant agreement among active climate scientists²⁹ that (a) climate change is occurring, (b) the situation is serious, (c) there are thresholds beyond which the damage cannot be

²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as ‘every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force’ (1990, p. 4). We have argued elsewhere that, ‘We follow Bourdieu in arguing that dominant culture, in largely justifying social inequalities, protects them from serious challenges. Stratification beliefs internalized during socialization lead many to attribute the consequences of structural violence to individual failings. . . . These dominant beliefs—disproportionately influenced by individualism, racism, sexism, and skeptical altruism—frame economic uncertainty, massive economic inequality, the loss of decent jobs, the fraying of the social contract, and persistent racial and gender inequalities in disproportionately individualistic terms. As we have argued in more detail elsewhere, in order for all Americans. . . to challenge inequalities, they need the cultural tools necessary to identify and understand them. We should not underestimate this symbolic dimension of our struggles. Addressing the insecurity of large portions of the population will likely require more than changing economic structures of domination, as important as that is. Symbolic violence renders structural violence partially invisible, and we cannot address what we cannot fully see’ (2018b, p. 82). Johan Galtung argues that, ‘The object of personal violence perceives the violence, usually, and may complain—the object of structural violence may be persuaded not to perceive this at all’ (1969, p. 173).

²⁹ Emily Cloyd, the director of the Center for Public Engagement at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), explains that, ‘There is a consensus across the scientific community. Ninety-seven percent or more of actively-publishing climate scientists agree that the climate change we have seen over the past century is extremely likely due to human activity. This includes the original research studies coming out in scientific journals. It includes the National Climate Assessment here in the United States. It includes the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, an international report that looks across all of the publication that has happened recently, as well as bringing together experts to do a synthesis across all of that work. So we see it in the original literature, and we see it as people look at that literature as a whole in both U.S. and international assessments. So we do have a consensus that the climate is changing, that it is because of us humans, and that the negatives of climate change outweigh the benefits. There is broad agreement within the scientific community. There’s also agreement within the scientific community that there are ways that we can respond to

reversed for many years, and (d) human activities are a major cause (AAAS 2014).³⁰ According to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS):

‘Based on well-established evidence, about 97% of climate scientists have concluded that human-caused climate change is happening. This agreement is documented not just by a single study, but by a converging stream of evidence over the past two decades from surveys of scientists, content analyses of peer-reviewed studies, and public statements issued by virtually every membership organization of experts in this field’ (2014, p. 1).

Despite efforts by many powerful people and groups to convince Americans that climate change is a hoax, surveys reveal many promising trends in public sentiment. Majorities believe that the federal government is not doing enough to combat climate change (67%) and that most scientists agree that climate change is occurring (65%) (Funk and Hefferson 2019; Saad 2019). These are positive signs. But half of Americans believe that human activities are either not a major factor in climate change (30%) or not much of a factor at all (20%) (Funk and Hefferson 2019). Less than half of Americans worry a great deal about climate change (44%) or think it will pose a serious threat in their lifetime (45%) (Saad 2019). And about half of Americans (49%) believe climate change policies make no difference or cause more harm than good, while the other half (49%) believe they do more good than harm (Funk and Kennedy 2019).

Failing to act will have severe consequences for the planet, as well as serious social and economic implications for society. Rising seas threaten the communities of hundreds of millions of people all over the world. Agriculture and fresh water supplies are under threat. Animal and plant habitats are being ruined. Extreme weather is more frequent. Public health concerns abound and will likely disproportionately impact the most vulnerable social groups. Climate change will likely impact migration patterns, posing significant challenges for a number of societies. And political instability may result from competition over resources (AAAS 2014).

We should add that climate change models are often conservative because they cannot predict climate change related events in the future that may accelerate the change.

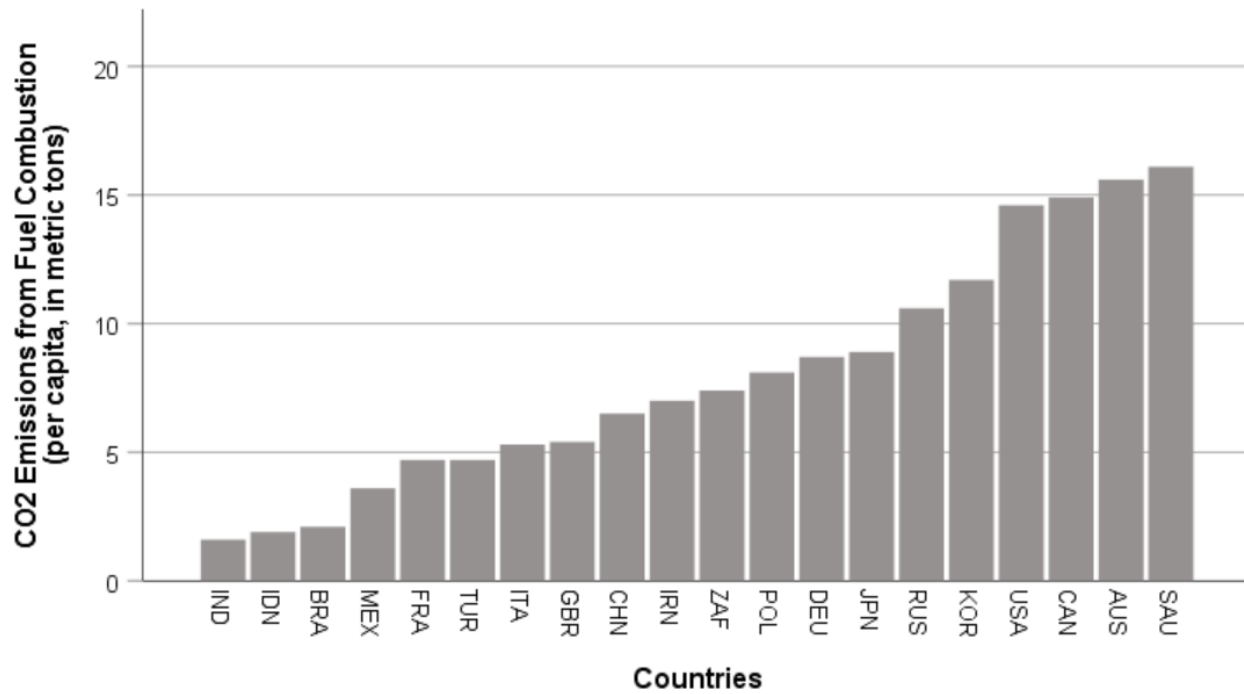
Climate change is a threat to the freedom and well-being of all Americans living today. Greenhouse gas emissions are also locked into the atmosphere, in some cases for more than a century, threatening the freedom and well-being of generations to come.³¹ The sooner we act, the less

climate change. This is not to say that scientists are advocating for a particular policy option to respond to climate change, but rather that we have an opportunity to act and that science can inform the choices that society makes about how to respond to climate change’ (interview conducted for this article).

³⁰ The AAAS explains that, ‘After remaining relatively stable at around 280 parts per million (ppm) for millennia, carbon dioxide (CO₂) began to rise in the nineteenth century as people burned fossil fuels in ever-increasing amounts . . . The rate of increase during the past 100 to 150 years has been much more rapid than in other periods of the Earth’s history . . . Many studies show that the combined effects of natural drivers of climate cannot explain the temperature increase that has been observed over the past half century . . . The projected rate of temperature change for this century is greater than that of any extended global warming period over the past 65 million years’ (2014, p. 3).

³¹ The AAAS explains that, ‘Waiting to take action will inevitably increase costs, escalate risk, and foreclose options to address the risk. The CO₂ we produce accumulates in Earth’s atmosphere for decades, centuries, and longer. It is not like pollution from smog or wastes in our lakes and rivers, where levels respond quickly to the effects

Figure 10. World Leaders in Per-Capita CO2 Emissions from Fuel Combustion.



Source: UCS 2020.

of targeted policies. The effects of CO2 emissions cannot be reversed from one generation to the next until there is a large-scale, cost-effective way to scrub carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Moreover, as emissions continue and warming increases, the risk increases' (2014, p. 1).

damage there will be to our ecosystems and the lower the cost to societies. We must find a way to significantly reduce emissions in areas like transportation and energy production, among others. Our government owes it to us, to the rest of the world (given our country's disproportionate impact on global emissions), and to future generations.

Government and Freedom

Properly-designed and well-funded government policies and programs expand people's freedom by enabling them to develop their abilities, acquire resources, and access opportunities. Cross-national data make this clear (refer back to Figures 3-5).

Economist James Heckman and his colleagues (2020) estimate that investments in high-quality early childhood interventions for disadvantaged children can lead to as much as a 13 percent societal return on investment per year. This means that the investment is repaid by a child's teenage years, and then society enjoys a significant 'profit' each decade thereafter across the life course (more economic productivity, better health, less criminality, etc.).

Referring back to Figure 4, we see the relationship between family benefits public spending and child poverty across OECD countries. This relationship is strong ($r = -0.68$, $p < .001$). This association represents a 4.2 percentage point reduction in a country's relative child poverty rate for every one percent increase (as % of GDP) in family benefits public spending.

This is but one among a number of examples of the manner in which social spending and government programs expand the freedom of citizens.³² It should not be surprising that the U.S., which was 35th out of the 36 countries in this analysis on family benefits public spending, also fared poorly (32nd) on child poverty.

Social Security, which is arguably America's most effective anti-poverty program, is a clear example of a government program which expands people's freedom. In a recent analysis, it was estimated that Social Security helped bring the elderly poverty rate down from close to 40 percent to below 10 percent (Romig 2019). It is no wonder Social Security is so popular. Americans surely recognize that all people will eventually age, and that aging constrains people's freedom through no fault of their own. This helps explain strong support for a social insurance program that allows all Americans to live longer, healthier, and happier lives.

Americans are worried about the future of the program—not because they should be worried, but because they have been misled to believe the program is broken. Sixty-seven percent worry about the Social Security system generally, 66 percent believe it faces serious problems, and 84 percent believe they will either receive reduced benefits (42%) or no benefits at all (42%) when they retire. Regardless of age, educational attainment, or political orientation, majorities of Americans oppose cuts to benefits, with 74 percent of all adults voicing such opposition. Sixty-three percent of Americans believe it is a bad idea to raise the retirement age (Parker et. al. 2019; Gallup 2020b).

³² For an excellent resource on this topic, see David Brady's 2009 book, *Rich Democracies, Poor People: How Politics Explain Poverty*.

Even considering the above concerns, Americans *underestimate* how important Social Security will be to them when they retire. Only 36 percent of Americans believe Social Security will be a major source of income for them when they retire, despite the fact that 58 percent of retirees confirm that it is a major source of their own income (Gallup 2020b). In fact, data from the Social Security Administration (SSA) suggests that 50 percent of married beneficiaries and 70 percent of unmarried beneficiaries receive 50 percent or more of their income from Social Security (SSA 2020).

So far, the program's opponents have failed in demonizing the program, but it is not for lack of trying. After the passage of the Trump tax cut in 2017,³³ for instance, some of the elected representatives responsible immediately turned around and claimed that they needed to cut entitlement programs in order to pay for the debt they had created. They supported such claims in part by arguing that such programs were in crisis.

Social Security is not in crisis. As Kathleen Romig, a senior policy analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, explains:

'[Social Security] can be easily tweaked and fixed, and the fixes are affordable. . . The most popular tweak is to raise or remove the cap on taxable wages. That would be at the top of my list. . . People should know that Social Security is working, the structure of it is sound, and it will be there for them.'³⁴

The supposed 'crisis' has been contrived by those who would like to dismantle the program, either because they are wealthy and do not believe it serves their self-interest, or because they are ideologically opposed to the principles underlying such programs (or both). Problems that arise with Social Security can be overcome by simple adjustments, such as raising or eliminating the regressive cap on taxable earnings.

Social Security expands freedom for millions of Americans as they face the inevitable challenges of aging. It is popular, it is effective, and it is working.

Two examples of policy-related areas where the U.S. is failing to expand freedom for the most number of people possible is healthcare and parental leave.

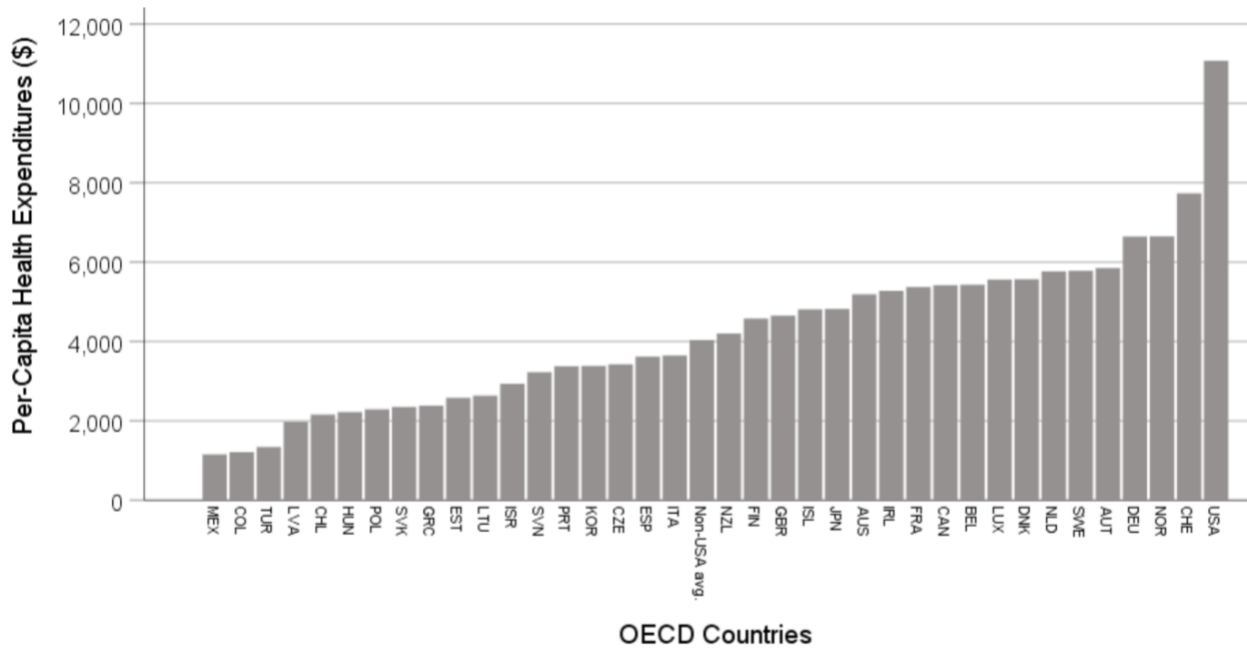
Other countries have found a way to deliver healthcare quality on par with the U.S., yet do so while covering all of their citizens and at a fraction of the cost. In the U.K., for instance, per-capita costs are less than half of those in the U.S., without sacrificing quality (see Figure 11). What is perhaps most shocking about this policy failure is that it would expand freedom *while saving Americans money*. The resulting reduction in healthcare costs per-capita would far exceed the increase in taxes.

The U.S. spends more than any other country in the world on healthcare. Although high-income countries tend to spend more per person on healthcare, even compared to similarly-large and wealthy nations, Americans spend significantly more per person and as a share of their economy

³³ For more on this legislation: <https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/hr1/BILLS-115hr1enr.pdf>.

³⁴ Interview conducted by the authors for this article.

Figure 11. Per-Capita Health Expenditures among OECD Countries.



Source: OECD 2020b.

on healthcare (Sawyer and Cox 2018; OECD 2020b; PCH-KFF 2020a). Despite this, healthcare outcomes are often worse in the U.S.

If the U.S. spends so much more on healthcare, one might think Americans must live longer, have better quality of life, cure diseases faster, and enjoy higher-quality care. Unfortunately, that is often not the case. Compared to people living in the U.K., Americans live shorter lives, have higher rates of premature death, and are more likely to die of many preventable illnesses (PCH-KFF 2020b & 2020c). In fact, among large and wealthy countries (OECD countries with above average GDP), the U.S. has the lowest life expectancy, the most deaths that could be prevented by high-quality healthcare, and the highest rates of disease burden (a measure of premature death and disability) (PCH-KFF 2020d & 2020e). Americans face high rates of cost-related access barriers, and the U.S. is the only wealthy country without universal insurance coverage (Claxton et. al. 2019; PCH-KFF 2020g). What may be surprising, given how much Americans spend on healthcare, is that they actually often use less care than people living in similarly-wealthy countries. Americans have fewer doctor visits per person and shorter average hospital stays (six days in the U.S. compared to seven days in the U.K.) (Kamal and Cox 2018).

On a variety of measures, healthcare quality in the U.K. is comparable to or better than the U.S. (Schneider et. al. 2017; Kurani and McDermott 2020). The U.K. has a reputation for long wait times for care, but this is primarily for specialist care. A recent survey found that 57 percent of adults were able to get a same- or next-day appointment when needed in the U.K., compared to 51 percent in the U.S. (PCH-KFF 2020f).

If Americans use less care and have worse health outcomes, how is it that they spend so much more on healthcare? The answer lies in the prices of health services. The much higher spending on inpatient and outpatient care provided by doctors and hospitals in the U.S. drives the vast majority of the disparity in health spending between the U.S. and similarly-large countries. For example, the average price of a bypass surgery for a privately-insured patient in the U.S. tops \$78,000, compared to just over \$24,000 for the same surgery funded by the U.K.'s National Health Service (NHS) (Kamal and Cox 2018). These patterns exist for prescription drug and imaging prices, too, though those services represent a smaller share of overall spending than physician and hospital care do. Similarly, the U.S. spends much more on insurance administration, but again, administrative overhead is a small share of health spending and eliminating insurer profits would make a relatively small dent in overall spending (PCH-KFF 2020h). Even if the U.S. drastically reduced spending on insurance administration and prescription drugs, to bring health spending in the U.S. down to levels similar to the U.K., American hospitals and other health providers would also have to be paid much lower prices.

The lack of paid parental leave in the U.S. is also far out of line with the rest of the wealthy world, and contributes to a number of social ills, including the gender pay gap. Most wealthy countries offer some form of guaranteed parental leave that replaces a substantial portion of workers' wages. The average length of maternity leave among non-U.S. OECD countries is about 19 weeks, and the average wage replacement rate is about 77 percent (OECD 2020a, p. 3). The U.S. offers no federally-guaranteed paid parental leave. This restricts the freedom of millions of American families. The burden falls disproportionately on women, and negatively impacts their careers as they are forced to 'take their foot off the career pedal' somewhat to better balance work and family.

Other wealthy countries realize how important well-designed and effective social policies are for their citizens' freedom. There is no reason why we should not have things like universal and affordable healthcare, and paid parental leave, along with many other social policies and programs. Our politicians are failing us and making us less free. We should not stand for it.

Journalism and Freedom

Healthy democracies need a high-quality and free press. As Tom Nichols writes, 'In a free society, journalists are, or should be, among the most important referees in the great scrum between ignorance and learning' (2017, p. 9). Given journalism's importance, the decline of traditional news outlets and recent attacks on the press in the U.S. should be seen as dangerous to the health of our society.

As an example, think about a topic we discussed earlier: climate change. How do we know when important climate change research has been conducted? How do we interpret the information in these studies, given that their complexity is beyond the reach of all but a small number of Americans who are experts on the topic? We know about these studies and understand them largely because of news organizations. Without these indispensable media outlets, we would not have the information that is necessary to understand how the climate is changing and what needs to be done in response.

Given the importance of good journalism, the public's loss of faith in media institutions is unsettling. Only 22 percent of Americans express confidence in newspapers, and just 18 percent in television news (Gallup 2020a). Only 28 percent of Americans believe the national news media has a positive impact on the country (Pew Research Center 2017). The very notions of truth and expertise face widespread skepticism. All of this is no doubt influenced by attacks on the press by the president and his allies. President Trump regularly labels verified news stories as 'fake news' and high-quality journalists as 'enemies of the people,' habits that are incredibly corrosive for our society.

Ordinary citizens cannot do the work of journalists as a part-time pursuit in addition to their work and family responsibilities. High-quality journalism is a full-time job that requires specific types of skills, contacts, a variety of resources, and a serious time commitment. Journalists identify when important societal developments have taken place, meticulously detail what has occurred, interpret and verify this information in consultation with important sources and/or experts, and then disseminate this information to the public in a manner that accessibly conveys the developments and their implications. Journalism serves the public interest by providing vital intellectually-rigorous information about the people, issues, and events in our world so that all of us—citizens, elected officials, business owners, etc.—can make the most informed decisions possible. Journalism also connects us to our communities and to the wider world beyond our communities.

In addition, journalism serves the public interest by holding those in power accountable—and not just at the federal level, which gets a lot of attention, but at the state and local levels, too. In fact, the demise of local news might be as alarming as any other problem facing journalism. The downfall of local news raises serious issues, not only by creating 'news deserts' (Garber 2020) that

deprive local areas of necessary information, but by failing to hold local governments and institutions accountable.

The modern world is incredibly complex and requires a prodigious amount of information to understand. We cannot be a free people without the services that a high-quality and independent press provides in helping us to navigate this overwhelming complexity.

Journalist Megan Garber discusses some important statistics highlighting the demise of traditional news sources in the U.S. in recent decades:

‘Between 2008 and 2017, American newspapers cut 45 percent of their newsrooms staff—and the following years, for many outlets, brought even deeper contractions. From 2004 to 2015, the United States lost more than 1,800 print outlets—some because of corporate mergers and others because of simple closures. Fewer than one in six Americans subscribe to a local newspaper, in either print or digital form. Over the past two decades, the revenue sources that once made newspapers lucrative enterprises—in particular, the money that flowed in from local and classified advertising—have dried up as sites like Craigslist have proliferated and as advertisers have shifted their dollars to digital platforms’ (2020).

Garber goes on to say that:

‘many Americans. . . are unaware of the gravity of the emergency—and unaware of the existential threat to the country’s informational ecosystem. A recent survey from the Pew Research Center found that 71 percent of Americans believed local news was, in fact, doing well financially. And it is indeed possible to watch the local news or listen to the local radio—or even to read the local newspaper, if you are lucky enough to have one, still—and be ignorant of the scope of the problem. Local news, or a version of it, is still being produced. Skeleton staffs at hollowed-out papers are doing tireless work to inform their audiences about their communities. And because of the amount of information being churned out nationally, every day, on the air and on websites and podcasts and social media, and in national papers and magazines, the cracks at the foundation can be difficult to perceive’ (2020).

We need to promote good journalism and freedom of the press whenever we can. We cannot stand for those who delegitimize expertise and facts. We need to reward good journalism with our attention, while starving bad media of it. If we can, each of us should financially support good journalism, however small our contribution, as well as organizations that support journalists—such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, or the Freedom of the Press Foundation.³⁵ We need to push elected officials to defend our independent press that for so long was the envy of much of the world. And as always, we need to stay informed and engaged. Freedom relies on it.

³⁵ Among a number of others.

Truth, Expertise, and Freedom

Americans are losing faith in each other and in important institutions at an alarming pace.³⁶ Unfortunately, this lack of trust has extended to key actors and institutions responsible for creating and disseminating knowledge:

- A majority of Americans (61%) believe the news media intentionally ignores important stories (Rainie and Perrin 2019).
- A minority of Republicans express at least a fair amount of confidence in college professors (48%) and journalists (30%), with 58 percent saying that colleges/universities have a negative impact on the direction of the country, and 85 percent saying the same thing about the national news media (Pew Research Center 2017 & 2019b).
- A minority of Americans express confidence in news on the internet (16%), television news (18%), and newspapers (23%) (Gallup 2020a).

Some of this is of course warranted. But one alarming component of this trend is Americans' loss of faith in notions of truth, facts, and expertise generally.

In the U.S., democratic ideals seem to make us believe that all opinions are valid, regardless of how little a person may know about a given subject, as Isaac Asimov observed:

‘There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that ‘my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge’ (1980, p. 19).

Or as Tom Nichols argues:

³⁶ Only 22 percent of Americans express a high level of trust in others—with 18-29 year olds expressing the lowest amount, at only 11 percent, while 46 percent of these young people express a low level of trust. A majority of Americans say most of the time people just look out for themselves (62%) and most people will try to take advantage of you if they get the chance (58%). Large numbers of Americans say they are not very confident that their fellow citizens will have civil conversations with people who hold different views (58%), cast informed votes in elections (57%), respect the rights of people who are not like them (52%), stay informed about important issues and events (51%), or reconsider their views after learning new information (50%) (Pew Research Center 2019b). Trust in the federal government is at a near-historic low, with only 17 percent of Americans reporting that they trust the federal government to do what is right ‘just about always’ (3%) or ‘most of the time’ (14%)—down from over three-quarters of Americans in the 1960s (Pew Research Center 2019a). Only 37 percent of Americans express at least a fair amount of confidence in elected officials generally. Many Americans think it is either somewhat or very hard to tell if elected officials are telling the truth when they speak (64%) (Pew Research Center 2019b). A majority of Americans (69%) believe the federal government intentionally and unnecessarily withholds important information from the public (Rainie and Perrin 2019). A majority of Americans (59%) report that they are not confident in the honesty of U.S. elections—only Chile (65%) and Mexico (68%) report higher levels of doubt among OECD countries (Reinhart 2020). Pride in America is at its lowest point since Gallup began measuring it almost two decades ago (Brenan 2019). A minority of Americans express confidence in Congress (11%), the criminal justice system (24%), public schools (29%), banks (30%), the medical system (36%), the Supreme Court (38%), and the presidency (38%) (Gallup 2020a).

‘we’re *proud* of not knowing things. Americans have reached a point where ignorance, especially of anything related to public policy, is an actual virtue. To reject the advice of experts is to assert autonomy, a way for Americans to insulate their increasingly fragile egos from ever being told they’re wrong about anything. . . we hold *all* truths to be self-evident, even the ones that aren’t true. All things are knowable and every opinion on any subject is as good as any other’ (2017, p. xx).

Nichols later adds:

‘These are dangerous times. Never have so many people had so much access to so much knowledge and yet have been so resistant to learn anything. In the United States and other developed nations, otherwise intelligent people denigrate intellectual achievement and reject the advice of experts. Not only do increasing numbers of laypeople lack basic knowledge, they reject fundamental rules of evidence and refuse to learn how to make a logical argument. In doing so, they risk throwing away centuries of accumulated knowledge and undermining the practices and habits that allow us to develop new knowledge. This is more than a natural skepticism toward experts. I fear we are witnessing the *death of the ideal of expertise itself*, a Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laypeople, students and teachers, knowers and wonderers—in other words, between those of any achievement in an area and those with none at all ‘ (2017, pp. 2-3).

When the proper gatekeepers and guardrails are in place, the danger all of this poses can be managed. But in recent years, these protections have been breaking down at a remarkable pace.

The current administration is guilty of an egregious disregard for facts and notions of truth. One of the main planks in Donald Trump’s presidential campaign from the very beginning was a tougher approach to unauthorized immigrants. During his June 2015 speech announcing his presidential candidacy, for instance, he famously claimed:

‘When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people’ (M. Lee 2015).

And a few weeks later in an interview with Fox News he claimed:

‘I can never apologize for the truth. I don’t mind apologizing for things. But I can’t apologize for the truth. I said tremendous crime is coming across. Everybody knows that’s true. And it’s happening all the time. So, why, when I mention, all of a sudden I’m a racist’ (M. Lee 2015).

Immigration policy of course needs to be debated amongst citizens and policy makers, and there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer to how we should proceed. There are facts and data that support a

variety of positions, but how these facts should be prioritized is subjective, and the ultimate policy that we enact is also a matter of values. Whatever we decide to do, however, we should insist that everybody involved in the debate rely on facts.

Trump's public immigration comments, from his presidential announcement to now, have consistently suggested that the southern U.S. border is the source of most unauthorized immigration (it is not—see Warren 2019), that the southern U.S. border and unauthorized immigration are significant sources of U.S. terrorism (they are not, and it is not even close—see Nowrasteh 2019), and that unauthorized immigrants are more prone to violence than native-born Americans (they are not—see Nowrasteh 2018). As Figure 12 clearly demonstrates, based on the well-known work of Alex Nowrasteh, unauthorized immigrants have *lower* criminal arrest rates *and* conviction rates (regardless of whether you look at overall convictions, homicides, larceny, or sex crimes) compared to native-born Americans. And while not shown in this figure, rates for authorized immigrants are even lower in all of these categories.

While Trump is an especially egregious example and has certainly contributed to and accelerated the undermining of facts and expertise, it is a problem that is much broader than him. A variety of factors—including cultural notions of equality ('all opinions are equal'), the complexity of modern life, innumeracy, scientific illiteracy, civic disengagement and political illiteracy, a decline in trust in people and institutions, a culture of narcissism/individualism/anti-intellectualism, extreme partisanship, ideological silos and echo chambers, the internet, the decline of traditional news, the proliferation of low-quality news sources like cable news and partisan internet websites³⁷ (despite the continued existence of high-quality sources like the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*), the rise of talk radio and punditry, the democratization and commodification of higher education,³⁸ and social media—have helped to undermine notions of truth, facts, a shared reality, and the value of expertise,³⁹ sending mass ignorance into hyper-drive (Nichols 2017; McIntyre 2018).

This is of course very dangerous. Climate change, for example, is happening and will be devastating to human societies if not confronted. To decide facts do not matter, be unable to identify credible information and sources, misunderstand the scientific process, search only for facts you like, assume both sides are equally valid, attack expertise, question the very notions of knowledge/truth/reality, spread falsehoods, and/or weaponize doubt, is to endanger the freedom of the planet's population when it comes to an issue as important as climate change (McIntyre 2018).

Yevgeny Simkin offers a valuable take on the rise of social media and its impact on our post-truth moment:

'Let's take a short walk down memory lane. It's 1995. A man stands on a busy street corner yelling vaguely incoherent things at the passersby. He's holding a placard that says 'THE END IS NIGH. REPENT.' You come upon this guy while

³⁷ Leading to a 'fusing of entertainment, news, punditry, and citizen participation' from many 'news' sources today (Nichols 2017, p. 143).

³⁸ And any number of related problems, from the adjunctification of faculty, to grade inflation, to the weakening of the division between students and professors, to student evaluations of faculty, to political correctness, and beyond.

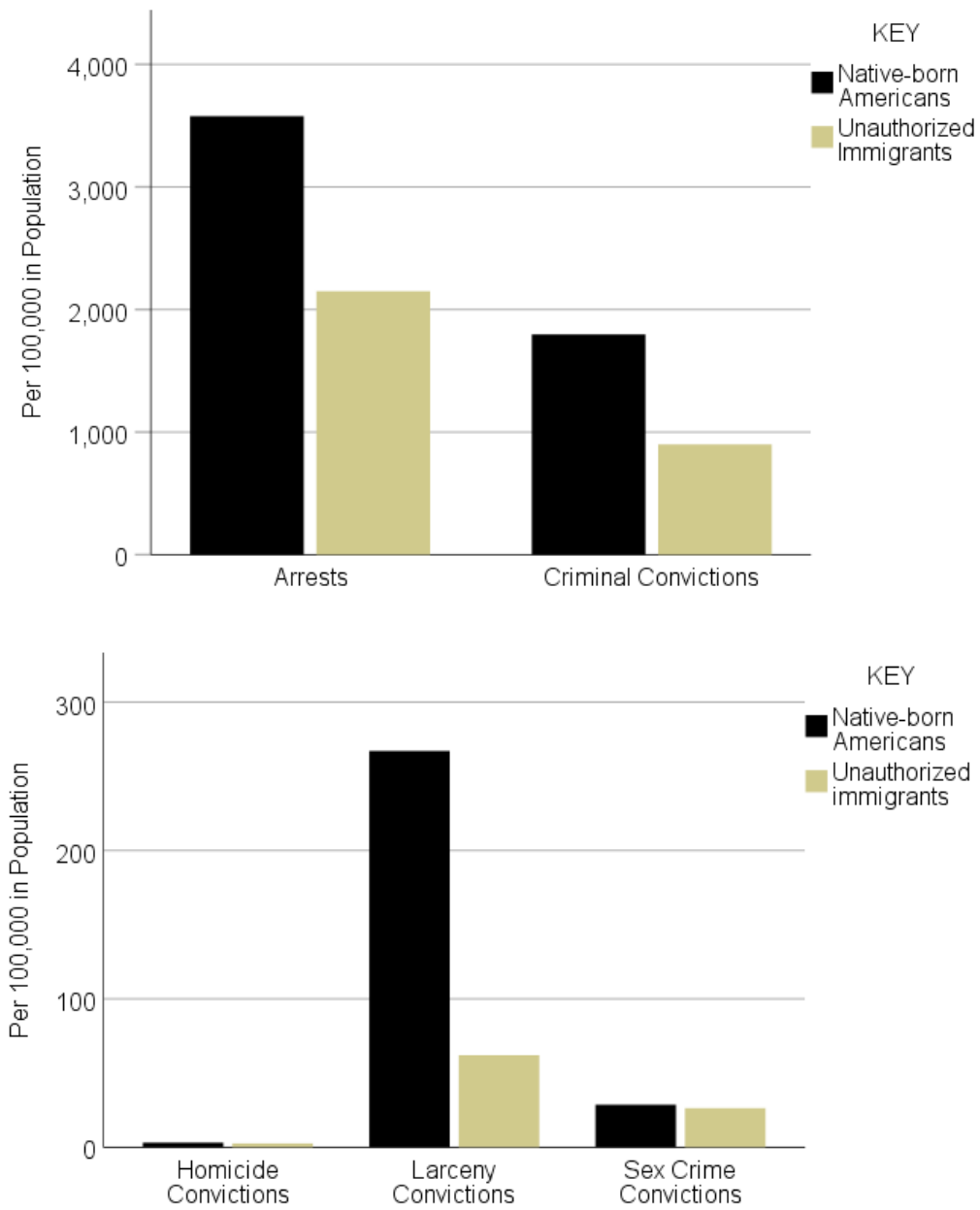
³⁹ Tom Nichols writes that, 'True expertise, the kind of knowledge on which others rely, is an intangible but recognizable combination of education, talent, expertise, and peer affirmation' (2017, p. 30).

out getting the paper. How do you feel about him? You might feel some flavor of annoyance. Most people would also feel compassion for him as he is clearly suffering from something. No reasonable person would think of convincing this man that his point of view is incorrect. This isn't an opportunity for an engaging debate. . . Now fast forward to 2020. In terms of who this guy is and who you are absolutely nothing has changed. And yet here you are—arguing with him on Twitter or Facebook. And you, yourself, are being brought to the brink of insanity. . . Back in 2011 Chamath Palihapitiya left Facebook and said of his former company, 'It literally is a point now where I think we have created tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works'. . . I'm here to make the case that all modern social, political, and sociological ills can be traced to social media. It is single-handedly responsible for the tearing apart of our social fabric which Palihapitiya so presciently predicted. It's not 'part of' the problem. It is the problem: An insidious malware slowly corrupting our society in ways that are extremely difficult to quantify, but the effects of which are evident all around us. Anti-vaxxers, anti-maskers, QAnon, cancel-culture, Alex Jones, flat-Earthers, racists, anti-racists, anti-anti-racists, and of course the Twitter stylings of our Dear Leader' (2020).

Simkin notes that, before the internet, people socialized in small and geographically-constrained groups. Their manner of communication relied on a whole host of cues and norms of behavior. In that environment, 'the only place for the 'End Is Nigh' guy to get an audience is on the street corner' (Simkin 2020). He was not granted the platform nor the legitimacy that our current environment allows, as the internet now inserts such people into global conversations, where once-fringe beliefs are given legitimacy and amplification (Simkin 2020).

Social psychologists have uncovered a variety of human tendencies which, in the context of the post-truth age, can have devastating consequences for our society (Nichols 2017; McIntyre 2018). Humans seek to avoid cognitive dissonance by maintaining harmony between their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. When they are misaligned, this results in psychic discomfort, and we seek resolution. We are often motivated to find a resolution which aligns with our belief system, matches our beliefs to our feelings (instead of the other way around), and preserves our sense of self-value. As social psychologist Jonathan Haidt contends, 'When the facts conflict with. . . sacred values, almost everyone finds a way to stick with their values and reject the evidence' (Mooney 2014). We are highly motivated not to accept information that questions our deepest sense of our personal identity as well as the identity of the groups we belong to. When we are surrounded by ideologically-similar people, we tend to adjust our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors to align with theirs. It is uncomfortable for humans to tell each other they are wrong, and most of us would like to get along with people we care about and/or interact with frequently, thus allowing false claims to proliferate in social situations. We all want to seem culturally literate, and therefore pretend we know more than we do. We tend to seek out information which confirms our firmly-held beliefs, accept facts which bolster our preferred vision of the world, and avoid/reject information that contradicts our beliefs and/or threatens our ego. People often overestimate their abilities, and for people with low abilities, their ignorance on a particular matter is so severe that it often prohibits them from even identifying their own incompetence. If we hear a claim enough times, we may

Figure 12. Arrests and Criminal Convictions, Native-Born Americans compared to Unauthorized Immigrants.



Note: Arrests: 3,578 (per 100,000) for native-born, 2,149 for unauthorized. Criminal convictions: 1,797 versus 899. Homicides: 3.1 versus 2.6. Larcenies: 267 versus 62. Sex crimes: 28.6 versus 26.4. Source: Nowrasteh 2018.



"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

CartoonCollections.com

By Peter Steiner. Reprinted with permission.

begin to believe it is true, and forget its original source. And when confronted with evidence that our beliefs are wrong, humans often reject the evidence and maintain their incorrect belief, or worse, double-down (Nichols 2017; McIntyre 2018).

These are tendencies that humans have always had. They are dangerous to society when societal gatekeepers and guardrails break down. And this is what is happening in the U.S.

In the current environment, we can resolve cognitive dissonance without having to resort to accepting the shared reality of dominant culture. One can find enough supposedly 'legitimate' sources (people and institutions who claim expertise but are in fact partisans, from cable news to ideological news websites to hyper-partisan think tanks) to confirm a variety of what would have previously been considered fringe beliefs in other eras, helping to confirm faulty beliefs and avoid psychic discomfort.⁴⁰ When millions of other Americans are doing the same, one can socially conform to those within their ideological bubble, rather than a larger shared American experience. Research does suggest that when repeatedly presented with corrective empirical evidence, even partisans can begin to change their beliefs over time. Unfortunately, in our current polarized

⁴⁰ Tom Nichols notes that, 'when a layperson's riposte to an expert consists of 'I read it in the paper' or 'I saw it on the news,' it may not mean very much. Indeed, the information may not have come from the 'news' or 'the paper' at all, but from something that only looks like a news source. More likely, such an answer means 'I saw something from a source I happen to like and it told me something I wanted to hear.' At that point, the discussion has nowhere to go; the original issue is submerged or lost in the effort to untangle which piece of misinformation is driving the conversation in the first place' (2017, p. 138).

society where we are increasingly living in ideological silos, such repetition is becoming increasingly less likely (Nichols 2017; McIntyre 2018).

Lee McIntyre, author of *Post-Truth*, explains some of the dangers of our current moment:

‘The cognitive bias has always been there. The internet was the accelerant which democratized all of the disinformation and misinformation and diminished the experts. Democratization has led to the abandonment of standards for testing beliefs. It leads people to think they are just as good at reasoning about something as anybody else. But they’re not. At the doctor’s office, I don’t ask for the data and reason through it myself and decide on the course of treatment. It takes expertise and experience to make that judgement. Just like I can’t fly my own plane. There is a scene in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* where he is in the room with all of these goblets and chalices and doesn’t know which one is the Holy Grail. That’s where we are right now. We have the truth right in front of us, but we don’t know which one it is. There is a slogan that science deniers use, ‘Do your own research.’ If science is about facts, why can’t I just go out and find my facts? But you need guidance to know what is factual, you need experts. Many Americans have an enormous misunderstanding about science generally. They misunderstand the term ‘theory,’ for instance, thinking that any theory is as good as any other, rather than realizing that some theories are more credible than others because they are warranted by the evidence.’⁴¹

Hannah Arendt famously wrote that, ‘The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction. . . and the distinction between true and false. . . no longer exist’ (1951, p. 474). While we are not likely headed toward totalitarianism, the implications for our current moment are clear: the undermining of truth, facts, expertise, and reality can be deeply destabilizing for a modern society.

Academics have an important role to play. For starters, we can continue our efforts to make academic work and the scientific process easy for the public to access and understand. We should also be very clear about what counts as an empirical fact and what is a subjective value. Especially pertaining to debates based on opposing values—from abortion to gun control to healthcare and beyond—we should not make claims in our research or our classrooms suggesting that our perspective is objectively true if it is not. Different sides in these debates certainly rely on empirical facts to support their positions, but the ultimate decision regarding policy is a subjective matter where facts, values, and beliefs have to be prioritized.

Consider a debate which often arises in college classrooms: whether the U.S. should adopt a national government-run universal healthcare system.

Debates about universal healthcare are not just debates about facts, but also about values. It is true that healthcare systems in places like the U.K. and Germany have shown us that we can have universal access and better healthcare equity without sacrificing quality or driving up cost (quite the opposite when it comes to cost!). While one side may value access and equity above all else,

⁴¹ Interview conducted by the authors for this article.

however, the other side may value the freedom they believe markets and small governments provide. You may not share their values, but you certainly cannot claim they are objectively false. To claim one perspective is objective truth in one's research or teaching is not only intellectually dishonest, but it undermines students' trust in experts and empirical facts more broadly.

What should Americans do in the face of contemporary threats to truth, facts, reality, and expertise? It will not be easy. Be truthful. Think critically. Don't be cynical or defeatist. Welcome true learning over confirmation. Do not lock yourself in an ideological silo. Become more scientifically- and mathematically-literate. Realize you are not an expert on most things—but others are. Compare your beliefs and the things that you desperately want to be true to the empirical evidence. Understand your cognitive biases. Be skeptical of things you know to be true, and especially skeptical of things you desperately want to be true. When a news story does make you feel good or bad, and in the process motivates you to want to accept or reject its premise, ask yourself why. Learn what makes for good evidence, what makes for bad evidence, and how much weight to give to different facts. Value scientific rigor and expertise, and learn how to better identify both. Have high standards, not only for the value that it brings to your own intellect, but to the authority it then gives to your claims to others. Challenge inaccuracies, lies, and misinformation—but do so gently, or risk having the opposite effect from what you intend. When you know something to be scientifically accurate, keep repeating it even in the face of skepticism. Remind yourself often that no political party or ideology has a monopoly on truth. Any ideological point of view has massive holes and multiple blind spots—identify yours. Remember that every issue is not 'balanced' by competing facts on both sides—in the example of climate change, the idea that it is a hoax is a lie, and deniers do not possess an equivalent number of facts on their side of the argument. Pay for news if you can, but no matter what, frequent legitimate news sources. Rely on multiple news sources. Turn off talk radio and cable news, no matter how good they make you feel. Do not get your news from Facebook or Twitter. . .

. . . And demand that your elected leaders follow all of this advice as well.⁴²

Parting Thoughts

How do we decide how to structure society in a manner that enables freedom for all Americans? A useful tool for thinking about this is *A Theory of Justice* (1971/1999) from John Rawls.

Rawls notes that in a just society it is of course important that all individuals have an equal right to certain basic liberties (such as freedom of thought, speech, property, due process, and voting, freedom from harm, etc.), and important that everybody has open access to desired positions in society. But he argues that you would also want to ensure that any social inequalities exist because they are beneficial to everybody, and that regardless of where you find yourself in the social hierarchy, you are treated fairly.

Rawls noted that modern societies are complex systems where many people with many different talents work together for the greater good. In such a society of interdependence, we must collectively decide the most just manner to structure the institutions and practices of our society

⁴² For good sources on this topic, sources which informed much of this section, see Tom Nichols's *The Death of Expertise* (2017) and Lee McIntyre's *Post-Truth* (2018).

and how its resources and opportunities will be distributed. In order to design a just society, he argued:

‘Somehow we must nullify the effects of special contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage. Now in order to do this I assume that the parties are situated behind a veil of ignorance. . . no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like’ (Rawls 1971/1999, p. 118).

To ensure a just society, one should design social institutions and practices from behind a ‘veil of ignorance,’ or without any idea about which social position you would inherit and which particular talents you would be endowed with in that society. This would ensure that you would design your society in the fairest and most impartial manner possible in the event that you do not start out on top.

You would likely not choose to live in a society that allowed slavery. You would probably reject a caste system. It is highly likely you would choose to live in a democratic society, a system that Winston Churchill famously described as ‘the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time’ (1947).

You would probably reject societal designs which unfairly distributed abilities, resources, and opportunities based upon one’s social class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other group membership. You would reject all of these designs out of fear that it is you who would end up in a subordinate position. Most people would still likely design a society that, to the greatest extent possible, rewarded hard work and smart choices—but they would demand institutions and practices that prevented one’s inherited social position from dictating her/his life.

Behind a veil of ignorance, you would not allow racism or sexism or concentrated disadvantage or violence or child poverty.⁴³ You’d likely reject inequalities that limited your ability to succeed based on your inherited social class, race/ethnicity, or other social status. It is doubtful that you would allow climate change, given that you do not know whether you will be born in 1950, 2050, or 2150, or whether you will be born in Denver or Malé. You would probably want good healthcare, no matter to whom or where you were born. You would not allow those with more money than you to distort the political system to their advantage. You would likely support a high-quality free press and access to the findings of experts, so that society functioned well and so that you personally had the highest-quality and quantity of information possible, regardless of your station in life.

⁴³ The costs of childhood poverty in the U.S.—in terms of impacts on future economic productivity, healthcare costs, criminal justice costs, and other costs—have been estimated to be over one trillion dollars per year, which is over a quarter (28%) of the federal budget. For every dollar spent on reducing childhood poverty, the U.S. would save at least seven dollars due to the corresponding reduction in the societal costs of poverty (McLaughlin and Rank 2018; Rank 2018). Mark Rank, one of the study’s authors, notes that, ‘It is not a question of paying or not paying. Rather, it is a question of how we pay, which then affects the amount we end up spending. In making an investment up front to alleviate poverty, the evidence suggests, we will be repaid many times over by lowering the enormous costs associated with a host of interrelated problems’ (2018).

Our elected officials should always be in pursuit of solutions to our most pressing social problems. They should always be committed to the long-term American project of securing the highest degree of freedom for the most people. They should always design social policies from behind a veil of ignorance, never allowing people's life chances to be determined by forces outside of their control.⁴⁴

It should not need to be said that our leaders should always protect and strengthen our democratic institutions and sing their praises loudly and widely. Americans are increasingly losing faith in democracy (Foa and Mounk 2016; Taub 2016; Foa and Mounk 2017), which should be extremely worrisome to everybody in this country. Americans' belief in the importance of the U.S. remaining democratic has been weakening, their openness to nondemocratic forms of government has been growing, and their support for anti-system parties and movements has been increasing.⁴⁵ This erosion of faith in democracy is no doubt in part because of the failures of our leaders to protect our democratic institutions and operate within democratic norms. Our democratic institutions and norms can be saved, but we need to act now, as the 'warning signs are flashing red' (Taub 2016).

All of the social problems we have discussed in this article have been examined with scientific rigor, and we should be able to come to some general agreement about the manner in which they

⁴⁴ As Raoul Martinez notes, 'We do not choose to exist. We do not choose the environment we will grow up in. We do not choose to be born Hindu, Christian or Muslim, into a war-zone or peaceful middle-class suburb, into starvation or luxury. We do not choose our parents, nor whether they'll be happy or miserable, knowledgeable or ignorant, healthy or sickly, attentive or neglectful. The knowledge we possess, the beliefs we hold, the tastes we develop, the traditions we adopt, the opportunities we enjoy, the work we do—the very lives we lead. . . This is the lottery of birth' (2016, p. 3). He later notes that, 'Whether we inherit a lot of money or property, are free from oppression and prejudice, are well educated, bright, strong, healthy, resourceful or beautiful, is ultimately down to luck' (Martinez 2016, p. 68). In the words of Norbert Elias, people take on the 'stamp' of their experiences and relationships 'from the history of the whole human network within which [she or he] grows up and lives' (1991, p. 27). People carry their history and their whole human network with them at all times, according to Elias, whether they are 'actively working in a big city or shipwrecked on an island a thousand miles from [their] society' (1991, p. 27). And as we have written elsewhere, 'Rather than thinking of the individual and of society as separate and distinct entities, as many do, it is useful to think of both as constituting each other. Individuals and society exist in a reciprocal relationship where both are inextricably linked together. Just as individuals shape society, society profoundly shapes individuals. One cannot step into or out of society. We are always inside of society, and society is always inside of us. The person you become in life is deeply impacted by your lifetime of experiences and relationships. We might even think of ourselves at any given moment as the accumulation of these experiences and relationships. . . Society exists inside of us, beneath the skin, so that extricating ourselves from this accumulation of experiences and relationships is impossible. An astronaut who blasts off into space on a solitary mission does not shed this lifetime of experiences and relationships that have defined her or his identity, perceptions, beliefs, inclinations, abilities, behaviors, and so on' (Eppard et. al. 2020, pp. 17-18). Philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that, 'What Americans don't want to admit is that not only is there not a contradiction between state regulation and freedom, but in order for us to actually be free in our social interactions, there must be an extremely elaborated network of health, law, institutions, moral rules and so on. . . Ideology today is unfreedom which you sincerely personally experience as freedom' (Massey 2013).

⁴⁵ For those Americans born before WWII, the belief in the importance of living in a democracy was 'fervent and widespread. . . an almost sacred value'—72 percent of those born before WWII considered it absolutely essential, compared to only 30 percent of those born since 1980. In recent years, one in six Americans reported that military rule would be a 'good' or 'very good' thing, compared to one in 16 in 1995. Donald Trump was elected president in 2016 after running as an anti-system outsider, and his actions as president are believed by many to be extraordinarily damaging to democratic institutions and norms (Foa and Mounk 2016; Taub 2016; Foa and Mounk 2017).

constrain the freedom of millions of Americans. What to do about it is of course subjective. The answer is not always major government interventions or significant increases in public spending. But these problems place demonstrable limits on our freedom, and we should not stand for them to be left unaddressed.

America was founded on lofty ideals centered around notions of freedom. These were clearly aspirational, as they were not realized at the founding, but our history has been one of gradual (although uneven) progress toward that aspirational society. Our elected leaders will be obligated to continue this pursuit only if they are held accountable for their failures. We should all therefore examine the constraints on freedom in America, and reward politicians truly dedicated to unlocking freedom for all Americans.

If you hear and/or use a conceptual frame enough times, you internalize it, and think and behave in automatic, unconscious ways based upon these frames (Lakoff 2006). So think deeply about your own assumptions about what true freedom requires. Analyze the ideological content of the messages you receive daily (perhaps especially ones that make you feel good). Talk about freedom in its actual complexity, and demand that others do the same.

And hold your elected leaders accountable for bringing such freedom to fruition.

Appendix

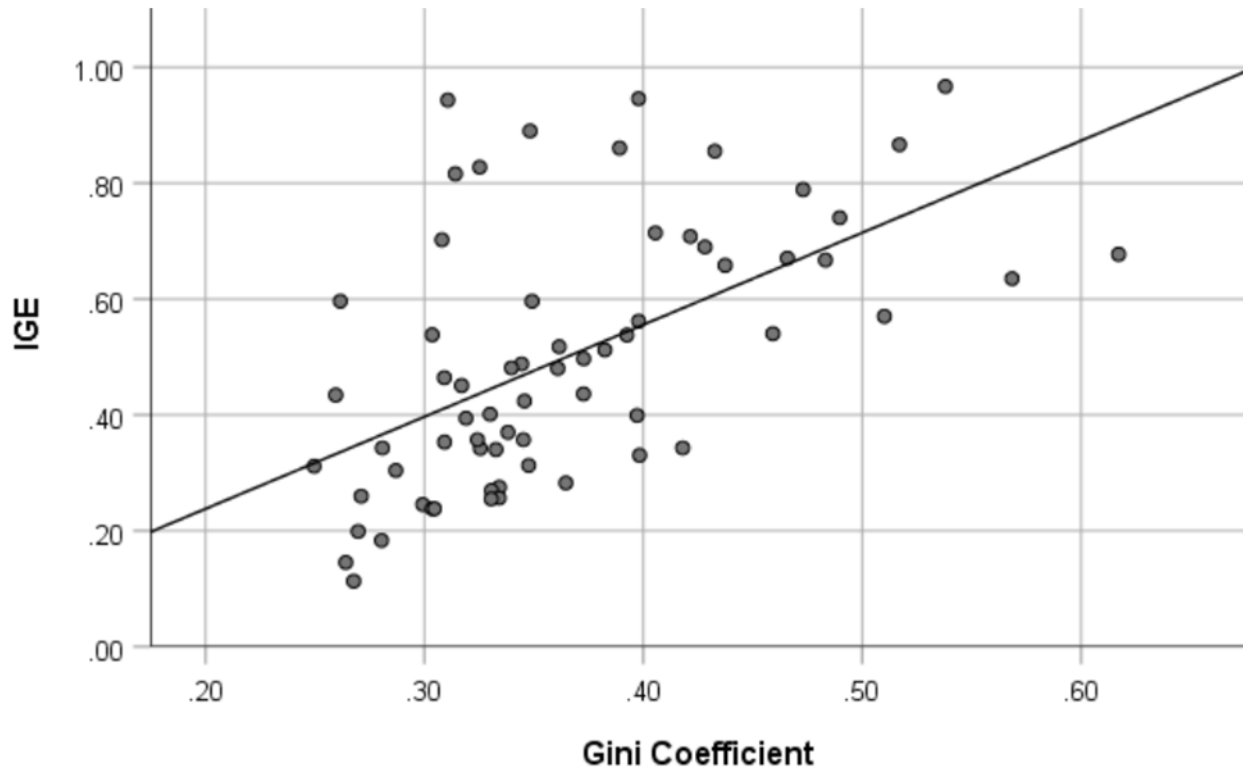
Appendix Figure 1. Association between Income Inequality and Homicides among 129 Countries.



Note: $r = 0.47$ ($p < .001$). All countries with data included ($N = 129$).

Source: Authors' calculations using World Bank data (2020),

Appendix Figure 2. Association between Income Inequality and Social Mobility among 66 Countries.



Note: $r = 0.57$ ($p < .001$). All countries with appropriate data included. Gini coefficient is historical average for each country from 1967-2018. For IGE cohorts, see GDIM 2018.

Source: Authors' calculations using GDIM (2018) and World Bank (2020) data.

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